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WILD BILL'S WEIRD FOE

BY W. G. PATTEN.



THEN HE HEARD A HOLLOW VOICE SAY: "IN THESE HILLS YOU WILL SURELY MEET YOUR DEATH, WILD BILL."

Wild Bill's Weird Foe;

OR,

The Mystery of Moaning Gulch.

A Tale of the Black Hills.

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CHAPTER I.

THE MINERS OF MOANING GULCH.

SOME years before the discovery of the rich gold fields of the Black Hills was "officially" made known to the world, Wild Bill, with four white men as companions, made his way into the then unknown country.

Although an old fellow known as "Crab" Zeb Davis had aroused the others to the possibility of making a golden fortune in the heart of the red-skin guarded land, Wild Bill was the real leader of the daring fortune-seekers.

As a plainsman, Wild Bill was a handsome man in those days. Six feet tall, broad shouldered, with well-formed chest and limbs, straight as the straightest of warriors, whose relentless foe he was, he was a man to attract and command attention wherever he went.

He had a slightly aquiline nose, and his well-formed mouth and lips were not entirely concealed by his handsome mustache. Although his blue eyes were clear, sharp and unwavering, the close observer often fancied he saw a faint light of sadness in their depths.

The strange man was not always free from haunting memories, and in times of thought and meditation, he often regretted that a seemingly implacable fate had forced him to shed so much human blood.

For be it known, all statements to the contrary, James B. Hikok was not naturally a bloodthirsty wretch who delighted to kill. By nature he was a man to avoid trouble whenever he could do so without lowering what he considered his dignity, but he would not be browbeaten or bullied in the least.

Many of those who never saw Wild Bill and know nothing of him save what they have read and imagined, have pictured him as a dark-faced and cruel-looking man, not to say brutal.

Never a greater error was made in regard to any one's personal appearance. Bill's face was actually mild and pleasing to look upon, and his complexion was that of the perfect blonde. His long hair fell in uncut ringlets upon his massive shoulders.

As proof of his gentle nature, let it be remembered there was nothing in the wide world he loved so much as a baby! He seemed to possess the magical power to charm children with a glance of his blue eyes and a smile, and they never seemed happier than when in his arms or on his knee.

Wild Bill was naturally a dandy, and he always dressed as well as his surroundings would permit, although his attire was almost always an extravagant combination of citizen and frontiersman's garb. He was immaculately neat in regard to dress, when he could be so.

Whether mounted or afoot, he was the most perfect specimen of physical manhood imaginable. His manner was quite opposite to what might be naturally expected of a man with his record; bluster and bravado seemed repugnant to him, and his conversation was always singularly clean and free from profanity. No man ever wielded greater influence among frontiersmen, for his word seemed to be law with them.

His remarkable skill with fire-arms won for him the title of "The Pistol King." He never drew a weapon unless it was absolutely necessary, and it was seldom he was obliged to shoot a second time at the same target.

It is not strange such a man should have had enemies. Since his death, many of his foes, who, when he was living, professed the greatest friendliness and admiration for him, have denounced him as "a bloodthirsty ruffian." By so doing, they have simply exhibited the contemptible cowardice and treachery of their natures, for they are creatures to fawn and cringe before those whom they consider their superiors.

Three of Wild Bill's comrades in the gold-seeking venture had been well-chosen. They were brave men—men of nerve, who could be depended on in time of deadly danger. The fourth had secured a place with the party more by accident than anything else.

As has been said, "Crab" Zeb Davis it was who aroused the others to the possibility of making rich gold finds in the Black Hills. Zeb was an old prospector, and for some time he had been longing to visit that portion of the Sioux Reservation which was so zealously guarded by the Indians.

"Thar's gold thar somewhar," he had more than once asserted. "W'at makes me think so? I hev reasons, you bet! Whar do ther red sarnips git ther big niggits they oftun hev arter a hunt through ther Wyomin' kentry? Thar hain't but one place ter find 'em, I reckon, an' that place is in them yar Hills."

But the dangers of an expedition into the red-skin haunted section kept the most daring adventurers away for a long time.

But the truth could not always remain undiscovered.

"Crab" Zeb had been given his odd nickname from his peculiar appearance and the redness of his hooked nose, which reminded one of a boiled crab. His face was thin and sharp, his eyes black and keen, his beard thin and straggling.

Davis was a small, round-shouldered old fellow, who looked rather insignificant as a foe, but he was stronger than he seemed, and "wiry as a withe." More than one red-skin had been fatally disappointed in the little old man, meeting death instead of securing Zeb's scalp, as anticipated.

He was a veteran plainsman and mountaineer, fully versed in all the ways and tricks of the red-men.

The third man was fully as large as Wild Bill, and he was known as Big Bruno. He claimed his true name was Bruno Bradstone, and he had the reputation of being an ugly man to crowd. His complexion was dark, and a full beard concealed the outlines of the lower part of his face. But little was known of his past life, and it was something he seldom mentioned.

Although there was something about Big Bruno he did not exactly like, Wild Bill admired him for the manner in which he had whipped two ruffians who had attempted to down him.

The youngest of the party was known as Nervy Ned, and, at times, his companions spoke of him as "The Silent." He was not more than twenty-two or three years of age, and he had a handsome face, with big brown eyes, which were continually filled with a sad light. He was very taciturn, being even more so than Wild Bill himself, if possible, and, like Big Bruno, he did not seem to care about speaking concerning his past life.

The Pistol King took a great interest in Nervy Ned, a name which the youth had won from his coolness in facing the most deadly danger, but for a long time the young man was not aware Bill paid any particular attention to him. It was seldom the famous frontiersman's way to let any one know whether he was interested in them or not.

After watching Ned for a time, Bill came to the conclusion that he had met with some great misfortune that had changed him from a buoyant youth to the moody man he was.

Ned's manner was refined and his speech usually free from the idioms of the border, making it plain he had been reared amid different surroundings.

James Jiblot was the man who had secured a place as one of the party more by accident than anything else, and he was often called "Ginger Jim, the Terror." Jim was a "natteral-born coward," but that did not prevent him from being a great boaster. Crab Zeb spoke of him as the "infarnalest liar on top o' creation," and the old prospector was not so very far out of the way.

It was Ginger Jim's delight to relate the most improbable and ridiculous tales of his own wonderful exploits and prowess. As he was somewhat overburdened with flesh, although not exactly "hog fat," his stories sometimes seemed actually silly.

Led by Wild Bill, the party succeeded in avoiding the red-skins and penetrating deep into the then unknown wilds of the hills. On entering the strange land, they immediately found yellow "sign," but it was Bill's advice that they locate in a place remote and secluded, where they would be the least liable to be discovered by their red foes.

Such a place was finally found.

Gold in paying quantities, so deposited by nature that it could be readily obtained by rocker or sluice, was discovered in a dark and dismal gorge, which they decided to call "Moaning Gulch." Their reason for giving the place such a name was that the wind, which seemed constantly sucking through the gloomy gorge, made

strange sobbing and moaning sounds—sounds which often seemed to come from the lips of heart-broken human beings.

At mid-day the gulch was dismal and forbidding, and at night it was a place to terrify any one who did not possess nerves of steel. In the darkness the moaning and muttering of the wind suggested a whole legion of lost spirits doomed to forever wander through the Stygian blackness of eternal night.

Occasionally, little by little, the sounds would die away, sobbing soft and brokenly like a child weeping itself to sleep. For a brief space utter silence would reign in the strange gulch, and then—

A fiend from Hades could not utter a more blood-freezing shriek that would sweep along the dark gorge. It was enough to make the flesh quiver with horror.

"I'll wager something the red imps steer clear of this place," observed Wild Bill; "and I do not blame them in the least. But there is gold here, and right here we will try our fortunes."

"Do you mean to build a cabin here?" asked Big Bruno.

Bill shook his head.

"I reckon not," he answered. "Why, I couldn't sleep o' nights with that infernal howling going on!"

"No more c'u'd I," nodded Crab Zeb.

Ginger Jim's fat face was white with fear, but he fancied he saw a chance to make an impression, and so he blustered:

"You fellers must be out of grit. I'd ez lives stop right hyer as anywhar."

Nobody paid any attention to him, and Nervy Ned offered no observation.

A place not far from the placer in the gulch was chosen, and there a rude cabin and stable for the horses were erected. The fortune-seekers slept at the cabin nights, and one of their number remained on guard by day, while his comrades labored in the weird gulch.

The result of the first labor in the gorge was even better than they anticipated, and they were elated over the prospect of speedily securing a fortune for each.

CHAPTER II.

WAS IT A SPIRIT?

MOANING GULCH both fascinated and repelled Wild Bill. Even at mid-day there was something about the place that made it seem uncanny to the Pistol King. It must be confessed that he was more than a little superstitious, and more than once he declared that the wailing wind distinctly uttered words which he could almost understand.

His companions did not laugh at him, for it was not considered a "healthy" thing to make sport of his fancies. More than that, there was not one of the five but occasionally fancied the wind's cries were singularly like the sounds which might issue from the lips of a human being in mortal agony.

As for Ginger Jim, he would not work in the Gulch when he could invent any reasonable excuse for remaining at the cabin as guard. Although in the perfect pink of health, he was troubled with what he called "bad spells" whenever he thought of entering the weird gorge.

Even the little stream that ran for a certain distance through Moaning Gulch seemed strange and mysterious. There was something soft and creepy about its movement and the water seemed strangely dark. Not far from the placer which the miners had begun to work the stream suddenly swerved to the right and shot into a black hole in the wall, entirely disappearing from the gorge.

Where did it go?

That was a question repeated among the fortune-seekers more than once. It vanished into the earth, and where did it come out to the surface again?

At first Big Bruno was for washing out the golden grains by the most primitive method—that of the shovel and pan. But Wild Bill opposed the plan from the start.

"It's too slow," he declared. "In that way we have settled that there's plenty of yaller here, and now I'm for building rockers or sluices."

"We shall lose time in that way," retorted Bruno.

"We may lose time at first, but we shall gain in the end."

"But there is no timber handy of which to build them."

"We'll have to bring it, pard."

"The reds—"

"Are just what I'm thinkin' of. There don't seem to be any round these parts now, but they

may take a trip through 'most any time. I've heard they're afraid of the Storm God of the Hills, but that don't prevent 'em from making huntin' trips through here, and, if they come before we get away, we may have to surrender our scalps."

"Kirect," nodded Crab Davis. "An' I need my wool ter kiver ther place whar I reckon w'at leetle brains I bev be."

"But, if we stop to build sluices or rockers, how is that going to help us get away the sooner?" asked Bradstone.

"By ther time we'll gain workin' 'em, dad burn et all!" snorted Zeb.

Bill bowed.

"That is it, exactly," he agreed. "Which do you favor, Ned?" turning to the silent youth.

"I am in favor of whatever you think best, Bill," was the answer.

"Oh, consarn ther Injuns!" came contemptuously from Ginger Jim's lips. "We're good fer ther hull Sioux tribe! You galoots don't want ter fergit I'm with ye! Now, w'en' me an' Kit Carson—"

"Thar, thet'll do!" snorted Zeb. "Derned ef I 'low you ever sot eyes on Kit Carson! As fer Injuns—wa-al, ther sight o' er ginnowne hostile'd be too much fer yer nervous system ter sustaud."

Ginger was plainly hurt by this, but he was silenced, as well.

Wild Bill carried the day, and the rockers were built, although it was necessary to carry the timber from which they were manufactured a long distance.

When everything was ready, they set about working in earnest, and the result of their labors was satisfactory, to say the very least.

The Hills literally abounded in game, and Wild Bill was chosen to keep the camp supplied with what meat it needed, a thing which he did in an efficient manner.

Not more than a quarter of Bill's time was spent in Moaning Gulch, and then, whenever he was leaving it, he would feel as if he wanted never to go back to the place again.

But this feeling would not last. After he had been away from the gorge for a time, he would begin to long to go down into the black recess again and listen to the wailing and shrieking of the wind.

There was that about the weird place that exercised over the Pistol King the kind of a charm which something horrible will sometimes throw about a strong mind.

Bill even dreamed of the place.

Sometimes it was necessary to keep the little slab window of the cabin wide open o' nights in order to admit pure air for the sleepers. Often Bill would arise and look out at the window, turning his eyes toward the dark opening of Moaning Gulch. He wondered how the place seemed in the dead hours of the night, and he resolved to visit it some time.

One night he dreamed the cabin door had not been fastened. He thought he started up and looked toward it just in time to see it swing softly and noiselessly open. His sleeping comrades were all around him, and none seemed disturbed by the gentle movement of the door.

Through the open doorway streamed the white moonlight. It did not quite reach Wild Bill.

He could look out through the doorway, but he saw no living thing.

Gradually, bit by bit, a shadow formed on the floor—a dark and unshapely thing at first, but it slowly assumed the outlines of a human being.

Bill wondered at this, for he could still look out through the doorway, and there seemed no person there to make the shadow on the floor.

A feeling of horror unspeakable came over the plainsman as he watched that shadow growing blacker and blacker, while there was nothing in the doorway to produce it. He was spellbound with the enchantment of the strange sight.

Black as ink became the shadow on the floor—ten times blacker than any shadow usually seems in the bright moonlight. It did not stir. Bill could see that it seemed like a human being, but whether man or woman, he could not say.

With a mighty effort, the scout threw off the horrible spell that had settled over him. He found himself sitting bolt upright, but the cabin door was tightly closed, and he knew it had not been opened at all.

At the same time, the slab window had been allowed to swing back on its leather hinges, and the bright moonlight sifted in at the opening.

But there was a figure fairly in the center of the open window—a human head!

Was it human?

The face was black as the ink-like shadow he had dreamed of seeing on the floor, and the eyes seemed to blaze like balls of fire.

It was no fancy this time; Bill knew he really saw the black face at the window.

Like a flash, he jerked out a revolver; but the face and the burning eyes vanished quite as swiftly.

Noislessly springing up, Bill hastily left the cabin, his revolver gripped in his hand. He dashed around the cabin to confront the prowler.

But he found no one!

There did not seem to be a human being anywhere in the vicinity. The moon was sailing well up on a cloudless sky, and on either hand the pine-covered hills loomed black and silent.

Wild Bill was amazed.

"I surely saw something at the window," he thought. "What was it and how has it vanished so swiftly? There does not seem to be a living thing astir anywhere around."

He stood in the shadow close by the cabin wall, but he watched in vain. The sight of no moving thing rewarded him, and the distant mournful hoot of an owl was the only sound he heard.

"If I had been drinking—But I have not! I do not understand it at all!"

He went round and examined the ground beneath the window, but it was not favorable to leave a mark, even if somebody had been there.

Bill's faith began to waver; he almost doubted that he had seen anything at all. Still he could not quite decide he had been fooled by his imagination.

After watching for at least an hour, he returned to the cabin.

Nervy Ned was awake, but he did not question Bill.

Not so Big Bruno, who awoke as the scout entered.

"What is the matter, pard?" he asked, starting up. "Is anything wrong?"

"I reckon not," was the reply. "One of the horses was down and couldn't get up—that's all."

And, without another word, Bill lay down to sleep.

However, he did not readily fall asleep. He could not help thinking of the black face at the window and in what a singular manner it had vanished. Something about the affair troubled the scout.

And then the dream was a strange one.

As has been said, Wild Bill was superstitious. He feared nothing human on the face of the earth, but he did not fancy anything ghost-like.

Finding he could not sleep, he arose and quietly closed the window, placing a strong bar across it, so it could not be easily broken down. Then he lay down again.

Strange thoughts ran through his mind. He began to believe his dream was a warning of disaster of some sort. And the thing he had seen at the window—

Was it a spirit?

CHAPTER III.

WARNED.

In the morning, Wild Bill went out and scrutinized the ground beneath the window once more; but he was poorly rewarded for his trouble.

He discovered nothing.

The others noticed a troubled light in Bill's eyes, but they did not feel like questioning him a great deal, so he escaped the necessity of telling them an untruth.

Bill was more than usually eager to get down into Moaning Gulch that morning—so eager that he started out before the others were ready.

Down in the gorge it was almost too dark to see to do the work of sorting the golden grains. The wind was not shrieking through the place, but there was a fitful sobbing and muttering that was scarcely less trying to the nerves than the harsher tones of the wind.

Being all alone, Bill stood and listened.

"If that ain't like the cryin' of a child, then what is it like?" he muttered. "Why, I can hear it saying it is hungry and cold! If it would only shriek and howl all the time, I could endure it much better, but this moaning and sobbing is what I find it hard to stand."

Those words showed the real tenderness in the heart of the strange man whose hands were stained with the blood of his fellow-beings.

Suddenly his eyes fell on something close by his feet.

It was a tiny footprint in the soft earth!

The next moment Wild Bill was on his knees, eagerly examining what he had discovered.

"By Heaven!" he muttered. "It is the foot-

mark of a woman! There is no doubt about that! And a small foot it was that made it! She wore a moccasin, and so it was probably a red-skin squaw. And still—"

He was in doubt. What could have brought an Indian to this place—a squaw at that?

"It ain't more than half likely the red whelps like this Gulch," thought the Pistol King. "The shrieking of the wind is enough to keep them away. But if one came—"

He leaped to his feet. If one came, were not others near? Perhaps there was an ambush and the red fiends were waiting till all the miners had assembled in the gorge, meaning to destroy at one blow the daring intruders on their Reservation!

The thought set Bill to investigating. His keen eyes searched every available place which could serve as a red-skin cover, but he soon decided the place was unsuited to an ambush.

Then he fell to examining the footprint once more. It told him little that he had not already discovered, but, had there been more light, he fancied he might have found others to match it.

Hearing his comrades approaching, Bill hastily arose and, with a stamp of his foot, destroyed the tell-tale sign.

For the time he determined to be the sole possessor of the secret.

More than once during the day his comrades wondered at his strange manner. He was often seen gazing around at the forbidding walls of black rocks, a dark look on his grave face.

"You don't like the place, Bill?" questioned Bradstone.

"Do you think so?"

That was the only reply the scout made.

In truth, a strange fancy had entered Wild Bill's head. He began to think he had an enemy near at hand—one who was waiting for a chance to strike at his life. Just why he thought this he could not have told, but the impression grew on him. He was a person who always gave heed to such impressions, and so he began to be unusually vigilant and watchful, which did not escape the keen eyes of his comrades.

"Suthin's ther matter with Bill," thought Crab Zeb. "He usually acts like this yar w'en he is thinkin' 'bout killin' somebody, an' I feel like ther wrz goin' ter be a high ole heap o' trouble."

The person in whom Wild Bill took the most interest was the youth Nervy Ned. Bill saw a restless light in the young man's eyes, and more than once Ned's lips moved, but no sounds issued from them.

Ned was usually the last one to enter the cabin and seek slumber, nights. He was inclined to remain outside, and sit on a certain boulder some rods from the cabin. There he would stare at the moonlight-flooded sides of the gorge by by the hour.

What was he thinking of?

Wild Bill would have given more than a little to know the answer to that question.

The night following Bill's singular dream, the scout resolved to approach the young man and have a talk with him. Ned was seated on his favorite boulder, and the Pistol King came up softly behind him.

Suddenly the youth began to mutter, almost wildly:

"Yes, it is her voice—Anice's voice! I can sometimes hear it in the shrieking wind, and it is like the voice of the beautiful one who is dead. Strange thoughts are finding a place in my brain. I wonder if her spirit does not haunt Moaning Gulch! Spirit! Why, I never believed in such things. And yet it seems as if she were near at this very minute! Oh, my darling—my beautiful one! you are lost to me forever!"

"Last night I dreamed of her!" he continued, seeming still wilder. "I thought she had returned to life, and was near. I fancied I had arisen and left the cabin. She was outside in the moonlight, and she beckoned to me, a smile on her face. I was sure it was no spirit, and I hurried toward her. She glided away. I called; she only beckoned me on. Down into Moaning Gulch I went. There she paused. I rushed forward to clasp her in my arms, but I only clasped the empty air."

"Then I awoke to see Wild Bill entering the cabin. He had been outside. I knew it was only a dream, but I was sick—oh, so sick at heart!"

He bowed his face in his hands, and Wild Bill crept softly away, leaving him undisturbed. The scout knew the young man's secret now, and he saw it was a case of a lover robbed by the cruel hand of death.

From that time forward, Wild Bill understood Nervy Ned better than any of the others did.

Wild Bill's Weird Foe.

"What's the matter with the boy?" asked Big Bruno, as Bill came back to the cabin. "I see you didn't speak to him."

"No, I thought I would not disturb him."

"He seems to be cracked."

"Cracked?"

"Yes. He acts so queer."

"Well, I don't reckon he is cracked, pard. The boy's all right, if he does seem a little off."

"Perhaps so," admitted Bradstone, lighting his pipe. "Anyhow he is a good worker."

"An' them's w'at counts," put in Ginger Jim.

"Then I'm afraid you do not count, James," said Bruno.

"Me—me?" squawked the Terror. "W'y I'm ther hardest worker round these diggin's!"

"How—with your mouth?"

"Looker here, Bradstone," and Jim blustered up; "Ihain't goin' ter be 'sulted in this yar way!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll let ye know who you're torkin' ter, by hokey! I'm a powerful bad man ter crowd! I want ye ter understan' I've got a record!"

"Yes, like the trotting horse—2:70."

"Wal, thar are some things I won't stan', an' this is one of 'em!"

"Sit down, then."

"In the mornin' I'll pack my traps an' leave you critters ter yer own destruction. I reckon you'll find I'mounted ter something then! Why, ther Injuns won't durst come hyer while I hang roun'. They've heerd of me, an' they're skeered. But as soon as I go 'way, you'll hev more'n nine hundred of ther red whelps pilin' down on ye. Your skelps will hang high an' dry."

Big Bruno laughed.

"Then you think you keep the Indians off?"

"I know it!"

"Yep," nodded Crab Zeb, appearing at this moment, "he's a powerful good skeer-crow. He'd come nigh frightenin' ther devil."

"Wal, by darn! I kin lick ye both!" howled Ginger.

"Git out!" exclaimed Zeb. "You couldn't lick er postage-stamp!"

Ginger was squelched.

That night Wild Bill was visited by another dream. He fancied he saw the door open as before, and the black shadow formed on the floor, though no person appeared in the doorway. He watched the shadow with a strange fascination, and he saw it take the form of a woman.

Then up from the shadow rose the form of the woman herself. She did not seem to come in at the open doorway, but she came from the inky shadow on the floor.

Her face was black and her eyes glowed like living coals. She was the same creature he had seen at the open window the night before!

And then he saw she held a knife in her right hand—a long, slender and deadly-appearing dagger!

How those gleaming eyes burned into his brain! He saw the knife quivering in her hand, as she bent over him. It was upraised over his heart!

In those burning eyes was a deadly resolve. He saw it, and he felt his end was near, unless he could throw off the spell which was on him.

Down came the dagger!

At the same moment, Bill awoke and started up, his jaws set to prevent the cry that tried to force itself from his lips.

The cabin door was closed, as it had been the night before. More than that, the slab window was closed and made fast.

Then Bill was angry with himself.

"What an infernal fool I am!" he thought. "I am getting to be a perfect baby! Never before was I so troubled by dreams, and I do not understand why this is. I shall have my nerves in bad shape, if this continues."

He lay down again, and, after a long time spent in thought, he once more fell asleep.

A surprise awaited him in the morning.

In one of the logs just above his head was driven a dagger. The blade pierced a bit of paper, on which was written:

"You will leave your bones in these Hills, Wild Bill! You have come to your doom!"

"THE BLACK WITCH."

"Hey!" cried Bill. "Look at this, pard! Who has been trying to play a trick on me?"

The others looked at the dagger and the paper, and expressed their amazement in various ways.

"Whar did it come from?" asked Zeb.

"That's what I want to know," Bill declared. "I found it stickin' in that log there, but how came it there? The door was fast and the window closed all night. Now, I want to know who has been trying a joke on me?"

His companions all disclaimed any knowledge of the matter. Bill eyed them closely, and he was sorely puzzled.

If one of them had not placed the dagger and

paper where he found them, how came they there?

Then he thought of his dream. Was there more in that phantasma of the night than he had imagined?

"I don't exactly understand this, pard," came slowly from his lips, as his piercing eyes searched their faces. "I thought you all white, and I am not ready to believe otherwise. But how came that knife where it was found? I have never seen a blade like this in the possession of any one of you, but— Well, I'll just keep the knife and paper and see what I can make out of 'em."

CHAPTER IV.

MORE GOLD-HUNTERS.

DEEP down in a secluded pocket, not many miles from Moaning Gulch, twinkled a cheery camp-fire. It was night, and the fire had been made in a spot where its rays would not be seen at a great distance, which showed whoever had lighted it knew there was some danger of detection by savage eyes.

By the camp-fire three men were seated. The one who seemed the leader of the party was tall, broad-shouldered and bewhiskered. His hair, beard and eyes were coal-black, and there was something about his manner that was not exactly inviting.

With his comrades this man was known as Black Bat.

The second one of the party was a young man, and some would have called his face handsome, but there was a sensual expression about the lips. He also wore a full beard, light-brown in color. His eyes were blue, but there was a hard, steely glitter about them that made them not exactly pleasant to look upon.

On account of his proficiency with the weapon, he was known as Revolver Ray.

The third man was a Mexican, and treachery was plainly written on his dark face.

His true name was Pedro Gallego, but his companions called him Mexican Pete.

All three were dressed in stout serviceable clothes and armed to the teeth. They seemed prepared to rough it in a wild country where dangers were many.

A short distance away in the darkness were their horses, five in number, two being pack-animals.

Moody looks rested on the faces of the three, as they gazed into the flaring fire. Their thoughts seemed far away, but, of a sudden, Revolver Ray said:

"We have not made a bowling success of this matter, Bat."

The black look deepened on the face of the man addressed, and he growled:

"That's not my fault. I've done my level best. I know that cursed Gulch is somewhere near at hand. It was only by chance we stumbled on it last year, but I thought I took notice enough to make sure I could return to it."

"You say there is no such thing as mistaking it for any other gorge?"

"No, you will think not, if we ever find it. Why, the wind howls through the place like ten thousand devils let loose!"

"Caramba!" exclaimed the Mexican. "The place may be haunted! Quien sabe?" (Who knows?)

"And would that keep you away, Pete?"

"Well, of that I cannot say. It might; it might not. You say there is very much gold there, señor?"

"If I am not mistaken," came deliberately from Black Bat's lips, "there is more than enough to make the three of us immensely wealthy. With your share, Pete, you can return to Mexico and marry some beautiful señorita. Then you may live happy the rest of your days, and, if you do not gamble too much, have enough left to bury you when you are dead."

"Quien quiere por mas?" (Who cares for more?)

"No Mexican I ever saw in all my life," said Bat.

"We will make one more search for the strange canyon or Gulch you speak of," observed Revolver Ray; "then, if we are not successful, I shall favor attempting to find another spot where gold may be panned in paying quantities."

"If such a place can be found among the Hills."

"Do you doubt it?"

"I am inclined to."

"Why?"

"Well, I do not know as I can answer that question."

"I believe gold in paying quantities is to be found in a hundred places amid these Hills."

"I do not say you are not right, but I simply doubt it. That we discovered gold in one spot is not proof it can be found anywhere here."

"Still, it is encouragement that it may be."

"If it were plenty, I believe its existence would have been made known to the world ere this."

"You forget how zealously the red-skins have guarded the Hills."

"No, I do not forget that, but I know white men are in the habit of going wherever they please, despite red-skins."

"Providing, of course, the allurement is large enough."

"Exactly."

"Well, we will prospect after we give over the search for the shrieking gorge. Anywhere else amid these hills we are in constant danger from reds, but we shall be safe in the mysterious gulch. The red whelps never go there."

"You say they are afraid of the place?"

"Yes. They say it is haunted by lost spirits who have been unable to find their way to the Happy Hunting Grounds. To them the shrieking of the wind is the despairing cries of those unfortunate spirits."

"If your party had remained in the gorge, they would have escaped butchery at the hands of the reds?"

"Surely; but they would have starved during the winter that was at hand. We knew we had only a short time to reach the settlements. Snow was liable to fall any day, so we pushed forward as swiftly as possible."

"And you alone escaped?"

"I think so. The red devils fell on us in Red Canyon, and I saw my comrades mowed down at the outset. I managed to get away amid the rocks, although pursued. However, darkness aided me in giving the red dogs the slip. I have told you about the horrors of my tramp, and how near I came to perishing of hunger and cold. I pulled through alive, and I swore I would come back and visit the golden gulch. I am back, but the gulch seems hard to find."

The three men were silent for several minutes, then the Revolver Dead-Shot spoke again:

"Once you said something about seeing a female figure down in this gulch we are searching for? You would not say much about that, though."

"There is not much to say. I did not talk about it a great deal, for I fancied you might believe me cracked."

"But you did see such a figure?"

"Yes."

"Was she young or old?"

"Young, I should say, but I cannot swear to that. It was in the dead of the night, and I only caught a glimpse of her. She seemed to see me, and, like a flash, she vanished amid the shadows. I was unable to find a trace of her."

"Santa Maria!" gasped Pedro. "That was a spirit!"

Black Bat laughed shortly, but Revolver Ray was silent and thoughtful. At length he shook his head, muttering:

"No, no! it is impossible!"

"What's impossible?" questioned Bat.

"Nothing," was the reply.

At this the black-whiskered man grunted and scowled, plainly being displeased, and the party relapsed into silence.

That night they took turns at guarding the camp, two sleeping while one remained on the watch.

The night passed without event, and they ate a hasty breakfast in the morning. Then they started out to search for the wind-swept gorge which might contain a fortune for each of them.

Like the days that had gone before, that one proved a failure. The place they were searching for was not found. They went into camp early, and they were three very dissatisfied men.

"It's no use, pard," said Ray, addressing Black Bat, "you can never hope to find that gorge again. As for me, I am done searching for it. To-morrow I shall spend in prospecting for yellow."

"And if Pete or I happens to find the gorge, you will claim an equal share with us!"

"If I find a paying placer, you and Pete will claim an equal share with me. You see that works both ways."

"You had better stick to the hunt a little longer."

"No; it is no good."

One word led to another, and in a short time the men were on the verge of a quarrel. Then Black Bat leaped up, grasped his rifle and strode out of camp.

Within half an hour he came rushing back, excitement portrayed on his face, and his eyes gleaming.

"I have found it!" he almost shouted.

"What?" cried Revolver Ray. "Not the gorge?"

"Yes, the gorge!" was the answer. "We are very near it. But the devil is to pay, for other parties are there ahead of us!"

CHAPTER V.

BLACK BAT AND BIG BRUNO.

As may be imagined, Black Bat's statement created no small degree of excitement. Both Revolver Ray and Mexican Pete were on their feet, and what they heard from the lips of their comrade caused them to utter exclamations of surprise and anger.

"Others there!" cried Ray. "They have no business there! The placer is yours, Bat, by right of discovery!"

"That would be true if we were not in an Indian Reservation and I had taken care to stake off my claim."

"Which you did not?"

"No."

"Why?"

"It would only have to served as a guide for any whites who might have ventured into the Hills. Staking it off would make it none the more mine, for I could not have my claim recorded."

"I see."

"Besides that, I wanted the whole placer, not a single claim—or even a double claim by right of discovery."

"Of course."

"You see, staking it would have been folly." The Revolver Dead-Shot nodded.

"I can see that plain enough now; but what are we going to do? We are left!"

"Not much!"

"What do you mean?"

"Business!"

"Explain."

There was a fierce look in Black Bat's eyes and his voice was hoarse with rage, as he growled:

"I mean to have what is rightfully mine!"

"How will you get it?"

"Fight for it!"

"Car-r-ramba!" came rolling from Pedro's tongue. "That is talk the kind of which I like to hear! We are armed. Do others have what should be ours? Then we will kill them!"

The black-whiskered man nodded.

"That is about what we shall have to do," he confessed.

Revolver Ray fell back a step, consternation written on his face.

"It would be murder!" he gasped.

A rasping laugh came from Bat's lips.

"Don't call it so coarse a name, pard," he advised. "It will not be murder, it will simply be obtaining our rights."

"Is there no other way?"

"I reckon not."

"But you will give them fair warning to quit!"

Black Bat looked at the Revolver Dead-Shot and laughed shortly.

"The marks of the tenderfoot are still on you, pard," he said with something like a sneer, which brought the hot blood to Ray's face. "You show 'em now and then."

"Well, I will confess I am not in the habit of murdering men in cold blood without giving them a show for their lives. It seems beastly to me!"

"Oh, you will get over that in time, eh, Pete?"

"Si, señor; he surely will."

"I did not come to these Hills to butcher white men!" declared the youngest of the party. "You told us there would only be red-skins to contend with, Bat."

"And I supposed I was telling the truth. These Hills have been so guarded by the Indians that white men have been unable to penetrate and explore them. It was only by the rarest accident that our party passed through them last year, and you know I was the only one to escape out of them all. The Indians did not mean any of us should carry the story of our discovery to the settlements, for they well know how the pale-faces worship the yellow metal. There was no reason why I should think there would be other whites than ourselves in the Hills."

Revolver Ray saw this was true, and for some minutes he was silent, gazing thoughtfully into the fire. Black Bat watched the young man's face with interest, and finally, he ventured to speak.

"Come, pard," he said, holding out his hand,

"it is for your best interest to join with us in this matter. We are here to make a fortune, and we cannot afford to allow what is rightfully ours to be wrested from us by others."

"Then let's make a square fight for it."

"The chances are we are outnumbered, and we would be defeated in a square fight. You must get over this squeamishness if you are going to become a frontiersman. Out here every man fights for his life and his best interest, and he allows no other man to cross his path. If such a thing does occur, one of the men has to die, and the other goes on about his business as calmly as if nothing had happened. The trouble is, you are not used to this part of the country. You have the right kind of stuff in you, but it has never been tested."

"No," confessed Ray, "I am not used to valuing human life so lightly, although I am far from being so much of a tenderfoot as you insist on making out. I have seen a little something of the rowdy West, as you ought to know."

"Well, well! Don't get your back up, lad! just you stand by Pete and I and you will come out top of the heap all the time. Don't get balky! Those men are mining the gold that should belong to us. We must have possession of that placer, and we will—*by fair means or foul!* Every day they are robbing us of the gold that should be ours. No matter if they knew it really belonged to us, they would not give it up. The chances are, they would do their level best to wipe us out, so we could not carry the secret to the outside world. They would not make an open fight, pard, don't you think that! If we do so, we shall simply be showing them more favors than they would show us, and they will think us fools."

"Come now, pard, be reasonable! Say you will fight for what is your own—say you will follow where I will lead! Trust all to me, and you will not regret it."

Black Bat had a persuasive manner, and it was little wonder the Revolver Sharp hesitated. Ray was not naturally a conscientious man, but never yet had he committed murder, and he hesitated about making himself the greatest criminal recognized by the laws of man.

Turning, Ray walked back and forth beside the fire, his hands clinched behind him and his head bowed. The look on Bat's face grew still darker, as he watched the youth.

"Give me till morning to consider this matter," urged Ray.

"You are foolish to waste one moment in consideration. We must either wipe out the men who are robbing us, or we must turn back from the Hills, poorer than when we came. All our trouble will be for nothing. We shall have risked the dangers of the wilds only to give up what is rightfully ours—give it up without a struggle to hold it when we see it in the hands of others!"

"Por Dios!" bissed the Mexican. "It would be what you call cowardly!"

Still Revolver Ray strode back and forth in the firelight, his hands clinched and his face clouded. He did not seem to hear the taunting words of the Mexican, for he was naturally quick-tempered, and would have resented such a fling.

Seeing it was useless to urge the young man to an immediate decision, Black Bat sat down and awaited his time. Pedro rolled a cigarette and began puffing excitedly.

Half an hour passed.

Suddenly Ray sat down beside the black-bearded man.

"Where is the Gulch?" he asked.

"To the east."

"Did you enter it?"

"No."

"Then how—"

"I saw the mouth of it, and I knew the place instantly."

"Did you see these other parties who have taken possession?"

"I saw the cabin they have built. They also have erected a stable for their horses."

"In the Gulch?"

"No; but not far from the mouth of it."

"I wonder why they did not build in the Gulch?"

"Do you remember what I told you about the shrieking of the wind? They would not be able to sleep some nights in that place. I do not blame them for not erecting the cabin down in the gorge."

"If they outnumber us, how do you propose to go to work against them?"

"I propose to overcome them one at a time."

Revolver Ray shrugged his shoulders and shivered.

"I don't like it!" came from his lips.

"No more do I," asserted Bat; "but I have often found it absolutely necessary to do things I did not like."

Pedro nodded and grunted at this; then he rolled and lighted another cigarette.

"Well," said the Revolver Sharp, "I do not propose to be cheated out of the gold we came after."

Black Bat grasped his hand, crying:

"Good boy! That settles it! To-morrow we will see what can be done!"

"Wouldn't it be a good plan to go take a peep down into the place to-night?"

The black-whiskered man shook his head.

"It would do no good, and we are all tired. We had better wait till the coming of another day, then see what can be done. There will be work enough for us, so we shall need what sleep we can get."

"If we are fortunate in downing this other party, their cabin and their tools will become ours."

"And what gold they have secured," sibilated Pedro.

"Of course," nodded Bat.

For some time they talked the matter over. At length, two of them lay down to sleep, leaving one on guard, as had been done the night before.

Another uneventful night passed, and the three fortune-seekers were astir at an early hour. After eating a hasty breakfast, which was washed down by water from a spring near by, they concealed their horses in a thicket, looked to their weapons and started out, Bat leading.

It was not long before they were looking down upon the cabin erected by Wild Bill and his comrades.

"There's their hang-out," said Black Bat; "and away yonder is the mouth of the gulch. They come out here to sleep nights, and go down there to work days."

"If they all do that, they must leave their cabin and stables unguarded," said Ray. "Why not go down there when they have gone to work, run off their horses and burn their cabin and stables?"

Bat shook his head.

"That would be folly. We want that cabin and stable for our own use when we have driven them out."

The Revolver Sharp was compelled to acknowledge that was so.

"Besides that, it is probable they leave at least one man to guard the place."

"Well, I tell you what I will do," came from Ray's lips. "We are to give them fair warning to start with, and then I will be ready for anything. You shall not have cause to complain of me after that."

This did not please Black Bat, but the young man was set upon it. While they were arguing, Pedro caught them by the arm, hoarsely whispering:

"See, señors, see! There they are!"

Having eaten their breakfast, the little party of miners had issued from the cabin. The trio far up amid the pines of the crest regarded them with interest.

"Five!" exclaimed Bat. "They are not quite two to our one."

"But near it," said Ray.

Suddenly the black-whiskered desperado uttered an exclamation of excitement.

"By heavens!"

"What is it?" asked the Revolver Dead-Shot.

"That man standing out there alone by the boulder!"

"Well! He is a splendidly built fellow. I can see that from here, without half trying."

"I know him!"

"You do!"

"Yes, curse him!"

"You do not love him?"

"I hate him!"

"Who is he?"

"Wild Bill!"

Revolver Ray nearly collapsed.

"Not Wild Bill, the scout?"

"Yes, Wild Bill, the scout and murderer!" softly snarled Black Bat. "I have a little score against him! Ha, ha! I am glad he is here amid these Hills! We will settle our account before either of us leaves the place! Now, those men down there are doomed, one and all!"

"What has Wild Bill ever done to you?"

"He killed Phil Cole."

"And Cole—"

"Saved my life once, at the risk of his own. When I heard Wild Bill had wiped him out in Kansas, I swore I would one day have the murderer's life! The time is at hand when I shall keep my oath!"

"Wild Bill is a dangerous man, if reports concerning him are true."

"I care not how dangerous he is. He is my enemy and my game!"

"Look, look!" softly cried Pedro. "They are going to the Gulch!"

"All but one."

"That one remains a guard."

Wild Bill led the way down toward Moaning Gulch, and three of his comrades followed. It happened that Big Bruno was left on guard, Ginger Jim being forced to take his turn in the Gulch with the others.

Little did the miners dream they were being watched by three men who were concealed far up amid the rocks and pines. They had no thought that there were white enemies near.

Big Bruno sat down outside the cabin and lighted his pipe to have a good smoke, having watched his comrades till they had vanished at the mouth of the gorge.

"It is scarcely necessary to leave a guard over the cabin," he muttered, after he had smoked in silence for a long time. "There are no redskins amid the Hills now, and as for whites—Hello! Great Scott!"

He leaped to his feet in amazement. A white man who did not belong to their party stood before him!

It was Black Bat!

Big Bruno's hand flashed toward his hip, but he was covered by a revolver in the hand of the other, and a stern voice cried:

"Go a little slow, pard, or eat bullets! I am in this game, and I hold a full hand! You can see—"

He suddenly stopped speaking, staring in astonishment at Big Bruno's face. For a moment both were silent, and then the man with the revolver almost shouted:

"Bruno Bradstone!"

The big man fell back against the cabin wall. "My God!" he gasped. "Bat—alive?"

CHAPTER VI.

TRouble BEGINS.

THE miners took their dinners down into the Gulch, and they did not return to the cabin till night. Darkness was spreading a dusky veil over the Hills as they approached the place where they had left Big Bruno on guard.

"I don't see nothin' o' our pard," observed Crab Zeb.

Ginger Jim wagged his head.

"Oh, he's prob'ly in the cabin asleep," he said. "You won't find nobody that'll watch the place same as I do. Now, I'm allus waitin' fer ye w'en ye come back at night."

Wild Bill said nothing, but led the way with rapid strides.

The cabin door was standing wide open and he entered. As he did so, he stumbled over a dark object on the floor.

"Hello!" he cried. "What is this? Strike a light! Is that you, Bruno?"

He quickly produced a match and lighted it, dropping on his knees as he did so.

"It's Bruno," he said, steadily, as the light flared up. "He's been used foul! Bring the slut."

The "slut" was a candle made of a rag that floated in a tin dipper of grease. It was brought and lighted. Then they saw Big Bruno lying on his back, his hands and feet made secure and a gag fastened into his mouth. His face was covered with blood, but he was not dead, for his eyes were wide open and restless.

"The devil is to pay!" declared Wild Bill, as he thrust the "slut" into Ginger Jim's hands.

Crab Zeb assisted in releasing the helpless man, and Ned brought some water to wash the blood from his face.

Bruno tried to speak as soon as the gag was taken from his mouth, but he seemed unable to handle his tongue for a time.

"Are ye bad hurt, pard?" asked Old Zeb.

The big man shook his head.

"Reckon not," he mumbled.

"Who did it?" asked Wild Bill, an ugly look in his usually mild eyes. "This is not red-skin work. The dogs shall pay for it, and pay dearly!"

"White men," nodded Bruno. "Caught me foul."

"How many?"

"I only saw three, but they said there were a dozen of them."

"Well, this is interesting! So we are not the only whites in the Hills?"

"No, and they claim the placer in Moaning Gulch."

"So? How is that?"

"Say they discovered it a year ago. Here,

let me wash the blood off. It is only a little rap up here in the hair, but it bled in great shape."

"How did you get it?" asked Bill.

"Was struck over the head with something."

"It looks more like a knife cut."

"Well, it knocked me very silly, anyhow, and it bled as if I had been struck."

Bruno washed off the blood, and then he answered their questions, Zeb having assisted him to bind a handkerchief about his head.

"How did it happen?" asked Bill.

"Well, you see, I was smoking outside after you had gone to the Gulch, and I was just thinking there was no need of a guard at the cabin, when, all of a sudden, a fellow appeared before me. He had the drop, and I recognized him as an old enemy I supposed was dead. He told me to fling up my hands, and I was obliged to do so. We were chinning, when somebody struck me on the head with something, and I was knocked flat. Then three men jumped on me and bound me before I could recover from the blow."

"Go on!"

How Wild Bill's eyes were glowing!

"When I got the bee out of my bonnet, they tried to force me to tell them where our gold was hidden, but I bluffed them off, though they swore they would kill me. Then this old foe of mine swore he was the original discoverer of the placer in Moaning Gulch. He said he discovered it while passing through the Hills with a party of friends last year. His friends were all murdered by red-skins, he alone escaping. With two companions, he had returned to the Hills, only to find us in possession of what was his by right of discovery."

"A likely story!"

"A dad burned lie, I 'low!" was Zeb's observation.

"Well," continued Bruno, "he swore he would possess the placer by fair means or foul and he gave us warning to get out."

"Ther gall o' him!"

"He said he would kill me, but one of the party was opposed to that. Then he decided I should convey his warning to you. He was especially bitter against Wild Bill, whom he said he hated most heartily."

Bill's jaws were set.

"After they had searched for the gold, which they failed to find, though they came mighty near it, the youngest one said never mind, they would have it anyway, if we refused to get out. They would all come down on us and wipe us out. Not one should be left to tell the tale."

"Wal, we'll be ready fer 'em!" howled Ginger Jim, although his face was pale with fright. "Did you tell ther critters I wuz hyer?"

Bruno paid no attention to the question, but went on:

"They wished me to render thanks for our horses, which they said they would appropriate. When they had left me here, I heard them get the animals out of the stable."

Cries of rage broke from the lips of the miners, and they all hurried to the stable.

The horses were gone.

"That settles it!" fell sternly from Wild Bill's lips. "I did hope that here in the Black Hills I would only find it necessary to kill red-skins, for I am tired and sick of being forced to take the lives of white men, even though they be ruffians and desperadoes. But it is the old story over again. It is too dark to follow a trail to-night, but to-morrow I shall go after our horses."

They all knew what that meant. Woe to the thieves if Wild Bill overtook them!

Old Zeb was also furious.

"Ther consarned boss-stealin' varmints!" he spluttered. "Do they think they kin drive us out o' hyer? Waal, they'll find they bev made a big mistake. We're hyer, an' right hyer we're goin' ter stay. Eb, Pard Bruno?"

"You bet your boots!" nodded the big man.

Nervy Ned said not a word, but as the saying goes, he was "doin' a heap o' thinkin'."

Ginger Jim strutted and blustered till Bill silenced him with a word.

Big Bruno gave them all the particulars of the affair, and the Pistol King listened attentively to every thing, saying very little. But they all knew that when Bill said the least he was thinking the most.

Nervy Ned wandered off alone and made the rounds of the place. Then they all entered the cabin and ate supper.

Wild Bill ate the least of any. In fact, he seemed to crowd down what he did swallow.

Suddenly, without a word, he started up from the block of wood on which he had been seated and abruptly left the cabin.

Fifteen minutes later, Nervy Ned found him standing by a lone boulder down toward the

mouth of Moaning Gulch. Bill appeared to be watching the moon, but Ned knew the scout was fully aware of his approach.

"I say, Bill."

"Well, pard?"

"What do you think of this business?"

"I think there is war at hand."

"You believe we shall have trouble?"

"Trouble has already begun."

Wild Bill did not take his eyes from the moon, as he answered the questions of the other. His manner was strange, but Ned thought nothing of that, for he looked on the Pistol King as a man who could not be fathomed.

"We have ugly foes to fight," said the youth.

Then Wild Bill turned and looked Ned straight in the eyes.

"Pard," he said, soberly, "I wish it were only humans as we have to deal with."

Then, without another word, he turned and walked toward the dark mouth of Moaning Gulch.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GHOST OF THE GULCH.

"WHAR'S he goin', boy?"

Ned started at the question, and turned to see Crab Zeb near at hand.

"You know as well as I," replied the youth.

"He did not tell me."

"He seems ter be strikin' fer ther Gulch."

"Yes."

"I'd like to know w'a takes him down thar now."

Ned said nothing.

"Bill is in an ugly state," muttered Zeb. "He's ready fer any kind o'er rumpus 'bout now, an' woe ter ther galoot that rubs his further wrong way. I tell ye, young pard, I saw blood in ther man's eye w'en Bruno wuz tellin' his story a while ergo."

Ned simply nodded and sat down on the boulder. Davis stood watching the young man for some moments, but Ned did not seem aware that any one else was present. The old miner shook his head slowly, and then turned away.

"I can't understand' thet boy no more than I kin Bill," he said, to himself. "They're both riddles, an' thet is facts, by Moses!"

He went back to the cabin and told Bruno and Jim that Bill had gone down toward the Gulch. Both were surprised.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jim. "W'at fer kin ther man want ter go thar at this yar time of night? Why, I w'u'dn't go thar now fer all ther gold thar is down thar! I tell ye I hain't skeered of ary livin' thing that is human, but that's su'thin' too spookish fer me 'bout ther bowlin' of thet wind. An' ter listen ter it in ther night! Holy sassafras! It'd make 'most any critter's ha'r turn white!"

Big Bruno did not express his surprise in words, but it was evident on his face. He seemed strangely nervous, and complained that his head pained him. For some reason, he took up the "slut" and passed by the window with it. As he did so, the wind blew out the light.

Ginger Jim gave a gasp of dismay.

"Light her up quick, pard!" he gurgled. "I feel like thar wuz er hull regymint of spooks lurkin' round!"

Bruno struck a match and lighted the rag, but he had not much more than done so before it was extinguished again.

"Ye will hev ter come erway frum thet winder ef ye want ter make her burn," observed Zeb.

The big man moved away from the window, and then he had no difficulty in making the rag burn.

"The breath of air that comes through that window is cold as ice," he observed, and he closed the opening with the slab arrangement made for that purpose.

Sitting on the boulder outside, Nervy Ned scanned the dark slope that rose back of the cabin. He was thinking how a hundred Indians might creep down on the little cabin and wipe out the entire party.

"We shall do well if we ever get out of these parts," he thought. "I seem to feel death in the air!" This is a region of mystery, and it oppresses me strangely. Still there is something about that moaning gorge that fascinates me. Why is it the wail of the wind so often seems like her voice? If I only could— Ha! what's that?"

Far up the dark side of the slope, where the moonlight did not reach, a light suddenly gleamed out and vanished. He watched, and he saw it appear and vanish again. Three times did that light flash out and disappear, and then the pine-clad steep lay silent and black in the shadows.

"Well, I would like to know what that means!" muttered the young man. "If that was not meant for a signal of some sort, what was it?"

Although he kept his eyes on the place where the light had appeared and watched for some minutes he did not see it again.

"Well, I will tell the others about it," he said, and he walked back toward the cabin.

He found Big Bruno outside.

"Did you see those lights?" asked Ned.

The big man started, but instantly replied:

"Yes, and I have been trying to make out what they were. I believe our enemies are up there."

Then they entered the cabin to tell Ginger and Zeb.

Meanwhile, Wild Bill had made his way down into the black and uncanny depths of Moaning Gulch. He took no light, and the place was one to shake the nerves of any but a brave and resolute man. The scout showed his caliber, for, although he was wonderfully superstitious, he walked along with a steady step. He had resolved to enter the place, and he was unfaltering, even though a legion of devils stood in his path.

It was not strange the man's best friends did not understand him. Such a mingling of superstition, bravery, coolness, passion, sternness and tenderness was never before found in human being. He was a man who could shoot down an enemy without a pang, but was known to shed tears over the grief of a child!

Who shall judge him? There is but One who can—One to whom the hearts of all men are as an open book.

The wind was softly sobbing down in the dark canyon. Its pitiful plaint touched Wild Bill's heart and awoke in his breast sad echoes that had remained silent and dead for many years. He paused and listened to the wind, scarcely breathing for fear he should miss some of its moanings.

One side of the gorge lay in the blackness of ink. The moon was high in the sky, and she cast her light half-way down the other rugged side of the mysterious Gulch. At one place there was a break in the wall, and there the moonlight reached to the very bottom of the gorge.

The brook that seemed to creep along with snake-like silence in the daytime was now whispering liquid words which the lone man seemed to understand. The moonlight touched a bit of it, and there it glimmered like silver.

Bill sat down on a bowlder that was in the edge of the moonlight. Burying his face in his hands, he sat there, listening and thinking.

How long he remained thus he did not know. It might have been but a few minutes, it might have been hours.

Suddenly a strange sensation began to creep slowly over him. He felt that he was not alone! It seemed as if another presence was close at hand.

He sat up and looked around.

Yes, there it was! In the shadow beyond the rift of moonlight stood a *something*. It was like the figure of a female, and it was all clothed in white. Its face was also white. It stood there as silent as a statue, apparently regarding Wild Bill.

The lone man caught his breath and, springing from his seat, stared at the apparition speechless—one hand resting on the bowlder while the other instinctively gripped his revolver.

The moaning of the wind had entirely ceased—the brook made not even a whisper. Dead silence rested over the Gulch.

Slowly the figure lifted one hand till it pointed straight at the man by the bowlder. Then he heard a hollow voice say:

"In these Hills you will surely meet your death, Wild Bill!"

The figure began to move—it was gliding away into the blackness. It mingled with the shadows and was nearly lost to sight.

With a cry, Bill leaped to his feet and plunged forward. As he did so, the ghostly figure disappeared in a twinkling!

In vain did Wild Bill search for the figure he had seen. It was gone, and he could not find it.

At length he paused, and all the horror of his position rushed overwhelmingly upon him. But through his set teeth he grated:

"I will not run! Not even the devil himself can make me do that!"

Deliberately he walked toward the exit from the Gulch. Not one man in a million but would have run.

Behind him and above his head the wind shrieked and laughed like ten thousand devils let loose!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SILENT ONE SPEAKS.

THOSE were prophetic words uttered by the phantom-like figure of Moaning Gulch. In those Hills Wild Bill was destined to meet his death at the hand of an assassin, but the time was yet some years away. Bill believed himself a man whose destiny was fixed unalterably by a Power he dared not question. He was known to say it seemed his unavoidable destiny to kill, and for years before his death he declared the end of his life would be a violent one.

He was right. His death was not worthy of his life, for he was given no chance to strike in his own defense. The assassin crept up behind the hero of many a deadly peril, and Wild Bill was given no warning of his impending fate. The bullet crashed through his skull, and he never knew why or how he was killed.

And a Deadwood jury pronounced the dastardly murderer, Jack McCall, not guilty!

But Wild Bill had friends in Deadwood. He was given a grand funeral, and Colorado Charlie erected a marble monument above his grave, which is in a most romantic and picturesque spot amid the mountains.

With his black eyes flashing, and a stern look on his usually kindly face, California Joe approached Jack McCall after the young murderer's acquittal by the Deadwood jury.

"Look byar," said the veteran plainsman, grimly, "Wild Bill wur a side pard o' mine. That thar fool crowd hev 'quitted ye, but ther best thing you kin do is git out o' Deadwood. It hain't a healthy place."

Poor Old Joe! Deadwood was anything but a healthy place, and he did not long survive Wild Bill.

Jack McCall did get out of the Black Hills metropolis, but he was not to escape. In Custer he boasted of his achievement, and was arrested. A second trial followed. He was convicted and hanged, and thus was Wild Bill avenged.

How the wind howled behind the Pistol King as he made his way out of the mysterious gorge! He fancied there was a touch of malignancy, hatred and derision in the cries and the uncanny laughter.

Still Bill walked deliberately along, never once turning to look back.

"Yell away!" he muttered, grimly. "You are having lots of fun at my expense, but you're welcome."

However, a breath of relief came from his lips when he reached the narrow mouth of the grim Gulch. Ahead of him was the moonlight, behind him was the darkness.

There he paused and looked back, his hand falling unconsciously on the butt of a revolver.

He could see nothing but the blackness of the place.

"Well, that settles it!" came from his lips. "Now I know the place is haunted. The place! Is it the place, or is it me that's haunted? For some time I have felt that I had a spookish foe; now I know it. And a female! Well, Bill, that is a heap sight more than you bargained for!"

He was oppressed by the words he had heard the figure in white utter. Had he come to the Black Hills to die? Being a superstitious man, it was not strange he was troubled by what he had heard. It would have been singular otherwise.

Bill did not remain long at the mouth of the Gulch. He could still hear the wind screaming far back in the blackness, and the sounds sent a creepy sensation over him.

"I can fight humans," he muttered, as he made his way toward the cabin; "but blared if I can match myself against ghosts. That is daubing it on a little too thick for my style!"

He found Nervy Ned outside the cabin. The young man was seated on the ground, and seemed to be waiting for Bill, for he arose at the Pistol King's approach.

"Bill."

"Hello, Pard Ned."

"You have been down in the Gulch?"

"I reckon."

"What did you find there?"

Bill was surprised at the question, for Nervy Ned was one who seldom asked questions. He never made himself offensive by his curiosity.

"I found the Gulch," half-laughed the scout.

"Yes, and something else."

"What do you mean?"

Bill was questioning now.

"There is more than the Gulch to find down there."

"So? What more?"

"Darkness."

"You bet."

"Shadows."

"Right, pard."

"A wind that shrieks and moans."

"You're shoutin'."

"There may be more, but all these are to be found down in Moaning Gulch."

Bill was silent for a little, looking closely into the face of the youth, which was revealed by the moonlight. There was something about the young man's face that he liked, and, with a sudden impulse, he held out his hand, saying, frankly:

"Pard Ned, I reckon you're the clean stuff!"

The youth took the offered hand, filled with surprise at the sudden act of the strange man, whom no one seemed able to comprehend.

"I am glad you think so, Bill," he said.

"You're no great talker," the Pistol King continued; "but by your eyes I have seen you did a pile of thinking. That is one thing why I take to you."

Ned was a bit confused, and knew not what to say, so he remained silent.

"I know you have a secret," Bill continued; "but that belongs to you alone. I have seen that something about Moaning Gulch affected you."

"You are right. The place works on me strangely. As you say, Bill, I am no great talker, but I feel like speaking just now. We are alone here, for I am left on guard. The others have rolled in for the night. I was waiting for you, as I wished to tell you about something that troubles me a little."

Bill led the young man to a place where they both could sit down in a comfortable position.

When they were seated, he said:

"Now, go ahead, Ned. I am ready to hear anything you have to tell."

"For some days I have felt as if a great danger were hovering over us," the silent one began.

Bill nodded.

"Somehow I could not shake off the feeling of oppression that crept over me. It seemed as if we might never escape from these Hills alive."

Bill did not confess it, but more than once he had thought the same thing possible.

"This affair to-day—the appearance of white foes at hand—has caused my fears to become even greater. Our horses are gone—"

"And I'm going after them in the morning."

"You may not be able to recover them."

"I shall do so, if it is in the wood."

"I know that, Bill; you will recover them, if any living man could. That is sure, but—Well, never mind that. Listen. After you had gone down into the Gulch, and while I was sitting on that bowlder yonder, I saw what I believe were signals made by our enemies."

"Ha! Where?"

"Away up yonder on the slope. The moonlight falls there now, but it was in the shadow then."

"What did you see?"

"A light."

"Yes?"

"It appeared and disappeared three times."

Wild Bill nodded.

"I reckon that was a sure enough signal, pard. But who was it to?"

"That is what I do not know."

Both were silent for a few moments, and Wild Bill seemed in a brown study. Finally, he lifted his head, saying deliberately:

"I am ready to confess I don't like it, pard. I thought I might get shut of this killin' business here in the Hills, or, leastwise, I'd only have to kill red-skins, and they don't count. But it looks like I was wrong. Ned, why is it some people never have to shoot a man?"

The youth was startled by the strange question, and he knew not how to reply. While he was hesitating, Bill continued:

"With me, it has always been shoot or be shot. I am not overly anxious to shuffle off this mortal coil just yet awhile, so I shoot. I love life, Pard Ned, and I love everything God made that is good and honest. I never did like crookedness and cussedness, which things I allow were made by the devil, not by the Ruler of the Universe. It has always been my way to kick against anything that wasn't white, and so I have made a right smart lot of enemies. They try to down me, and in order to keep on top, I have to down them. So it has been nothing but kill, kill, kill, till I am sick and tired of it!"

Those words gave Nervy Ned an insight to Wild Bill's true character such as he had never before had. He saw the man was in earnest, and for the moment, at least, the repugnance of taking human life, even in self-defense, was strong upon him. In a moment of passion, Wild Bill might forget his present feelings, but now

he was a man who detested the life he had been forced to lead.

For a moment the youth was tempted to offer sympathy to his companion, but he remembered what a strange man Bill was, and hesitated.

It was well he did.

Sympathy for Wild Bill would have been like coals of fire on his head. It was not sympathy he desired.

For a little time the Pistol King was silent. Suddenly, he straightened up, flinging out one hand.

"To-morrow I shall take the trail of the horses. If I overtake the thieves—well, the wolves may have a feast!"

Ned shivered. Bill's voice had grown harsh and cold, and once more he was the stern and iron-nerved man who had won such an unenviable reputation along the border.

The Pistol King arose to his feet, walked a few steps away, then turned, came back and sat down.

"You were speaking of the Gulch, pard," he said. "I do not know as I quite understood you."

"And I do not know as I quite understand Moaning Gulch," confessed Nervy Ned. "I am not a man who believes in spirits, Bill; are you?"

"Um," was the noncommittal answer.

"But there is something uncanny about that gorge," asserted the young man. "One night when you and the others were talking and smoking, I went down there all alone."

Bill was interested.

"What did you see?" he asked.

"Nothing."

Now he was disappointed.

"It was what I heard that has troubled me ever since," Ned went on. "You know how the wind sometimes shrieks down there."

"Well, I should say so! I heard it a bit ago."

"Well, those sounds have often seemed to me like the voices of human beings, and sometimes I have almost thought I could hear certain words."

The Pistol King nodded.

"Same here."

"But never as plain as that night. I went down by the sluices and sat there listening to the sobbing sounds. They fascinated me. Suddenly, I heard a voice call my name. Three times it cried: 'Bert, Bert, Bert!'"

"But your name is Ned."

"No, my true name is Elbert Wyndal."

"It might have been fancy, pard."

"It was not. I heard it as plainly as I ever heard anything in all my life. More than that, I recognized the voice!"

"Ha! You knew the voice?"

"Yes."

"Whose was it?"

"That of one who is dead and gone!"

CHAPTER IX.

NERVY NED'S STORY.

WILD BILL started to his feet in surprise. Nervy Ned also arose, and the Pistol King could see he was shaking with suppressed emotion.

What did the young man mean? He had distinctly stated he did not believe in spirits, yet he now claimed he had heard the voice of one who was dead and gone!

Bill gazed searchingly into the youth's face, but even his piercing eyes could not read therein the answer to the many questions which uprose within him.

For a little, both were silent.

Away off in the darkness near a distant crest a lone wolf howled.

"Boy," came soberly from Wild Bill's lips, "do you mean that?"

"That is what I mean," was the reply, but Nervy Ned belied his name then, for he was all atremble.

"But you said you did not believe in spirits."

"No more do I, Bill."

"You're getting me tangled, pard."

"I don't really think it was a spirit—no, no! But it was something—perhaps only my imagination."

Then Ned tried to regain control of his nerves, and he partially succeeded after a time. He motioned for Bill to be seated again, and both sat down.

"Bill, I like you," came frankly from the youth's lips.

"Well, I like that."

"You know I am not in the habit of talking much!"

"Yes."

"But, if you care to hear it, I feel like telling you my story."

"Well, drive ahead. I have thought you had a story, and more than once I allowed to myself I would like to hear you spin it."

"All right, you shall hear it now. It is not a very long story, and I will not drag it out, for I know you must need sleep."

"Don't you worry about that, pard. I am not at all hard up for sleep. In fact, I am fresh as a daisy. Go ahead."

"I have already told you my true name is Elbert Wyndal. I was born in Illinois. My parents were not wealthy, but they had a little something. However, when I came to manhood, I was not content to plod on an Illinois farm. I wanted something more than could be obtained in that manner. I dreamed of making a fortune."

"Among my schoolmates were two persons with whom this story will deal. One was my friend and chum, the other the girl I loved. Seba Rankin was my chum. We were always mates, and we stood by each other through thick and thin. He was a little the older, but, if anything, I was the stouter."

"Anice Aldrich was the girl I loved. It is not necessary for me to tell you how beautiful she was, for you might smile and say to yourself a great part of her beauty was the imagining of an enthused lover. Her eyes were dark, but her hair had a slight tinge of red, when the sunlight fell full upon it. She was almost two years younger than I."

"Now, it happened that Seba Rankin loved Anice, too, but both of us tried to keep the other from discovering we had a more than friendly interest in the little fairy. She lived with her mother, and she knew not whether her father was alive or not."

"When Anice was eleven, her father went to California to seek his fortune in the mines. He never came back. It was the same old story of hopes and fears, encouragement and despair. His early letters were full of light and shade. At one time he would be certain of winning a fortune within a short space, at another he would have no hope of success and would be ready to give up the struggle."

"That's the way," nodded Wild Bill. "I have seen hundreds just like him."

"Those letters became less and less frequent," continued the young man, "and, at length, they ceased entirely. Mrs. Aldrich tried in vain to get some word from her husband, and the brave woman never gave up the hope that he would some day return to his home—his wife and his child."

"Little Anice was a bright and vivacious creature, and she made friends with every one. I had no thought of falling in love with her when I first began walking home from school with Anice. She lived on the same road."

"Seba also paid her some attentions, but he never seemed jealous of me—that is, he did not seem so in those early days."

"But he opened my eyes to the secret of my heart. It came about when, one day, he spoke of Anice, as my 'little sweetheart.' How those words thrilled me—how they caused my blood to leap and my heart to pound within my breast!"

"Seba's eyes were searching my face, and he instantly cried, his face growing strangely dark:

"What makes you blush so, Bert? Ah! by gracious! I hit the truth that time! You are in love with little Anice Aldrich!"

"Somehow, those words angered me, and I made a sharp retort. I believe I told him it was no affair of his. He laughed unpleasantly, and then informed me he should do his level best to cut me out."

"For a while after this, our relations were strained, but we did not come to open hostility. Why, even our schoolmates did not dream there was any trouble between us! We seemed friendly still, and I resolved to remain so."

"Having made this resolve, I went to Seba and had a talk with him. I told him I believed I did love Anice, and, even if he cared for her, there was no reason why we should become foes. Each could do his level best to win her regard; and the one who was defeated should vote the other a lucky lad and offer congratulations."

"At this, his face lighted up, and he heartily agreed. We shook hands over it, and from that time on were openly rivals."

"For a while, it was hard to tell for whom Anice cared the most. She seemed to look on us both as her particular friends, and she treated us exactly alike. This was not strange, for she was still in short dresses."

"But, as she grew older and we still continued our attentions, she began to understand our meaning. Then she gradually grew to hold us both away. This aroused us. We had allowed

things to run along easily while she remained frank and friendly with both, but when she began to grow reserved, each commenced to fear the other was getting the inside track.

"One day Seba accused me of double play and unfairness. Now, I am called cool and nervy, but in those days I was hot-blooded and impulsive. We had hot words, and he applied an abusive epithet to me. I knocked him down."

"Seba arose and deliberately pulled off his coat. His face was black, and I saw he meant to lick me. I remained facing him, but I regretted my hasty blow. Still I was ready to meet him. He advanced, and our eyes met."

"For almost a minute, we stood staring into each other's eyes, neither speaking a word. Then he wheeled back toward his coat, picked it up and put it on. Having done this, he came back close to me and said, his voice being low and hard:

"I am not going to fight with you Bert Wyndal, but some time I will make you sorry for that blow!"

"Then he turned and walked away."

"I was already sorry, but my pride would not allow me to immediately confess it. However, I went to him the next day and asked his pardon. He hesitated a moment, then held out his hand. I grasped it, and the breach was healed."

"From that time forward, things were the same as before. We both continued our attentions to Anice, but neither knew for a time if the other had the advantage."

"We became young men, and we were not satisfied with our lives. The world was large, but we were living a narrow existence. Neither was possessed of much worldly wealth, and both craved a little. We had heard the stories of the fortunes being made in the mines, and we resolved to try our luck. We planned it all out together, and we set the day of our departure from the sleepy little place that had so long been our home."

"I resolved to know my fate before I left home, and I think Seba made the same resolution. Both redoubled attentions to Anice."

"I was the fortunate one. It was the night before the day we were to leave. Anice and I were together, and she knew I was going away on the morrow. Then I told the story of my love, and I pressed her for my answer. I told her if I was successful it would cheer me during all the long months I might be far from her side."

"Well, Bill, I am not going to tell all that passed between us that night, but from her lips I heard that she had loved me all along, and she promised to marry me when I came back. I told her I might come back poor, but she said that would make no difference. Poor or rich, beggar or prince, she would be my wife. Then I held her in my arms and kissed her again and again. How full with the pure delight of Heaven was my heart!"

"How the little girl clung to me when the time came for me to leave her. She wept, and I must confess, big, strong fellow though I was, my eyes were dimmed. It was like tearing out my heart to leave her, but I was now doubly resolved. I would win wealth—I would come back to her a rich man!"

"Although my heart had been sadly torn, I walked on air when I left her that night. I had won the prize I coveted most. How strong and brave I felt! No danger or privation would daunt me then. The soft breeze that came over the rolling prairie was not the usual zephyr of the country where I had spent all my life; it was the breath of the wide world."

"I saw her but once more before I left home. She was with others then, and we parted with a simple handshake."

"As planned, Seba and I went together. We did not strike for California, for the latest tales were of wonderful gold discoveries in Arizona. California miners and adventurers had crossed the mountains and invaded the red-skin haunted land."

"I will not follow up our careers till we joined a party of fortune-hunters, bound for Arizona. There were twenty of us, and we felt able to lick the whole Apache Nation. We were fools!"

"By this time Seba had learned of my good fortune with Anice, but, to my amazement, he claimed she had also promised to marry him when he returned. I did not believe that, and the result was a quarrel."

"Poor Seba! I have always regretted that trouble. We never made it up, and now he is dead."

"One night the Apaches came down on us. I am not going to linger upon the horror of that

fight. We all struggled with the savagery of madmen, but we were trapped and doomed. I saw it from the first. Seba and I fought side by side, and in the fiercest of the struggle he cried out that it was all up with us. Then I saw him fall!

"I was wounded in three places, and I know I must have been crazed. How I ever escaped is a mystery to me, and it must always remain so. I must have got away in the darkness some way—but how?"

"For a time my memory was clouded. When I came to myself, I was in a small Arizona camp. The people did not seem to know much about me, except that I had wandered into town one day and had not been able to tell where I came from or where I wanted to go. I had found work and managed to live along."

"But the greatest horror came to me when I learned that a year had elapsed since the terrible fight with the red-skins. At first I could not believe it—I would not! I thought the people of the camp must have made some mistake in the year. And still there was a consciousness that I had been for a long time in a dazed and almost trance-like condition."

"Then I was seized by a wild desire to go to her at once. I could not remain to toil in the mines. I must see her—Anice, my promised wife. As soon as possible, I started."

"I was a long time working my way back to Illinois, but I did so after awhile. Only to find Anice's mother was dead, and my little one was gone, no one knew where. As you may imagine, Bill, I was nearly crazed."

The narrator seemed unable to remain quiet any longer, so he leaped to his feet and paced back and forth.

Wild Bill remained on the rock, watching the youth and waiting for him to resume.

CHAPTER X.

THE BLACK WITCH APPEARS.

FOR several minutes the youth strode back and forth. Having worked off his excitement in a measure, he came back to his seat near the Pistol King.

"Well, Pard Ned," said Bill, kindly, "you did have a powerful hard row to hoe. I'm mightily interested in your yarn, so go ahead with the narration."

"There is not much more to tell, Bill. I set myself to trace her, but it was the hardest task of my life. Still I was successful in a measure—perhaps wholly so. I have never been quite satisfied, though."

"She had left her old home quiet, and gone West. Why she did so is a mystery, but I sometimes think she may have been searching for me. Be that as it may, I followed slowly on the trail till she joined what was known as the Mansfield wagon-train."

Bill nodded.

"I've heard of it."

"Then you probably know the train was bound for some point in Wyoming. Some have said that train was bound for these Hills, but I do not know about that."

"It may have been."

"Well, she joined that train. Now, no living being that I have ever found can tell what became of the train. It started out all right, although it seems singular there should have been so much secrecy about its destination. But what was the fate of the train?"

"You are askin' me too much, pard."

"I have sometimes thought it was bound for Utah, but that does not seem possible."

Wild Bill shook his head decidedly.

"Don't get that into your noodle, lad. It was not bound for the Mormon settlements. Everything points against that. The train headed for Wyoming, but what part of the Territory it started for is something I am unable to tell."

"Do you think it was destroyed by Indians?"

"I reckon."

"It certainly looks that way, still I have not given up hope. Anice was with that train, I think—in fact, I am almost positive. I have hoped to find the members of the train living somewhere in a quiet little settlement that is shut out from the world."

Bill arose and stood by Nervy Ned's side, resting a hand on the youth's shoulder.

"I do not want to discourage you," said the Pistol King; "but I am afraid there is little left for you to base your hopes on, my lad."

Ned bowed his head.

"I have thought so for some time," he confessed. "Still, I am on the search. It was that more than the desire for gold that brought me

into these Hills. I did not know but the train was bound for the Hills, and I fancied I might learn something of it."

"Now, when I say the moanings of that gorge down there often sound like Anice Aldrich's voice, you can understand why it works upon me."

"Yes, I understand it."

"Bill," and Ned spoke soberly, "I do not think I shall ever go away from here."

"So?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean to stay here for?"

"So I may be near that gorge!"

Those words affected Wild Bill more than he showed.

"Lad," he said, after a little silence, "you mustn't allow your fancy to get such a hold on you."

"Do you think it is all fancy?"

"It must be."

"Well, perhaps; but it does sound like her. And when I heard it crying 'Bert, Bert, Bert,' I felt certain it must be her."

"Still you say you do not believe in spirits. Oh, come now, Ned! own up that you are inclined to put a little stock in spooks."

"I never have, Bill, but that gorge has exercised a strange influence over me—it has almost, if not quite, changed me. If there is such a thing as spirits, perhaps Anice haunts that Gulch! Perhaps the train was destroyed near here—maybe she met her death down there!"

Ned little knew how his words and manner worked on the scout. Bill was impressed with the belief that the truth was struck at last. Moaning Gulch was haunted by the spirits of the murdered emigrants who had belonged to the Mansfield train!

Bill also arose to his feet and paced back and forth for a while. Finally, he paused and said:

"I wish to think this matter over, Ned. Leave me on guard, while you go into the cabin and get some sleep."

"Bill, I cannot sleep, after telling this story."

"Well, then, I will give you time to get over it, while I will go in and sleep. You must call me at midnight, and I will take your place. You will?"

"Yes."

Bill held out his hand, and the youth grasped it. Then, without saying more, they parted.

The Pistol King went into the cabin and lay down beside his comrades. He was a man who seemed able to command sleep at his will, and he was soon slumbering.

Near the hour of midnight, Bill awoke and arose. He had set his mind on awaking at that time, and it was not necessary for him to be aroused. He got up and quietly left the cabin.

Walking down toward the boulders, Bill saw the young man still sitting there in the moonlight. Ned did not stir at the sound of the other's approach, and he was not aware of the scout's presence till Bill's hand fell on his shoulder.

"You are not fit for a guard," said the big man, but he did not speak unkindly. "Go in the cabin, lad, and try to get some sleep."

Ned arose, without a word, and walked toward the cabin. Bill watched till the young man had disappeared, then he turned away, muttering:

"He is all broken up, and I do not wonder at it. Poor boy! he has had hard luck!"

"His story has set me to thinking. Is it always the wind that makes the horrible shrieking down in Moaning Gulch? Sometimes I have heard them when there did not seem to be a breath of air stirring. Is it not the spirits of the dead that make those sounds?"

Bill was more than half-inclined to believe that, and it was not strange he should. There was everything about the uncanny gorge to make a superstitious man think it was haunted.

"And the figure I saw there this night," he went on, muttering aloud. "That must have been a spirit. There was only one way I could have proved to the contrary, and that was by trying a shot at it. I almost wish I had."

"It may have been as the boy is inclined to think—the train was bound for the Hills. Perhaps they reached the Hills, and then they all met their doom. Who can tell? Possibly some of them sought refuge down in that black gorge and were butchered there. That would explain why the place should be haunted."

"By heavens! it is not impossible I have looked on the spirit of Anice Aldrich! That may have been her whom I saw this night, and she may have been warning me as a favor."

Then he laughed, shortly.

"A favor from a spirit! That seems a little odd. Well, I shall not fancy hanging around that place after this. There is too much spook-

ishness about it to suit my style. It has fascinated me, but I must keep away."

"But who or what is the black-faced creature of which I dreamed, and which I saw at the window? That is another riddle. I feel as if that creature is my deadly foe, yet I know not why it should be so. Can it be she—for it was a woman—is in any way connected with this wild Gulch?"

He walked to and fro, his hands behind him, his eyes keeping watch of everything. The moon was slipping down the western sky, and it would soon be hidden behind the pine-fringed crest.

After a time, Bill sat down on the boulder, resting his chin on his hands, and staring down toward the black mouth of Moaning Gulch. As he sat there, the grim place began to exert its singular fascination over him. He felt a longing to go down there again and listen to the wind. But Bill was on duty as guard, and he was not a man to desert his duty.

"The only way for me to get beyond the allurements of that place is to get out of these Hills," he thought. "As long as I remain where I can do so without much trouble, I shall have the desire to go down there and hear the wind moan and howl."

"But shall I ever get out of these Hills? The spook said I should die here, and, if it was really a spook, she probably had her information from headquarters. Well, if I am to be snuffed out, so mote it be. I will die game, and that is a settled thing."

He sat there for some little time, without looking around. At length, he began to feel the same as he did down in the Gulch when the white-robed figure was near. It was a strange sensation, and it crept over him bit by bit. He shivered and started to look around.

Directly behind him, only a short distance away, was a figure. It was not the same as he had seen down in the Gulch, but it was the one who had visited him in his dreams, and who had looked in at the cabin window. From head to feet it was dressed in black, and its face and hands were also black.

It was the Black Witch!

This creature stood rigid as a statue, gazing straight at Wild Bill, who, for a brief space, was frozen to the boulder.

There was something terrifying about the black figure. Bill was a brave man, but he felt his flesh creep.

Savagely flinging off the spell, he arose to his feet, demanding:

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

The Witch lifted one dark hand, her eyes glowing balefully.

"I am your foe, Jim Hikok, and I want your blood!" she answered, her voice being cold and harsh.

"Well, I swear you are frank!" confessed Bill. "You are my foe, perhaps, but I do not know why you should be that."

"It is not for you to know. Are you ready to die?"

"I guess not, madam; at least, I have no particular hankering to shuffle off the mortal coil."

"You cannot escape!"

"Is that so?"

"It is; you have come into these Hills to die!"

"That is pleasant information, but I must question your authority. Show us your papers for that."

Bill advanced toward her, but she instantly commanded:

"Back! Approach me at your peril!"

"All right," was the grim retort; "here I come."

But, as he darted toward her, she wheeled and fled with remarkable swiftness.

"Stop!" cried Bill—"stop, or I shoot!"

A taunting laugh was flung back at him.

Bill drew a revolver as he pursued, cocking it. Once more he commanded her to halt, but she paid no heed.

Then he lifted the revolver.

But he did not fire.

"No, I can't shoot down a fleeing woman," he muttered. "I must overtake her."

He thrust the weapon into his belt and darted forward at renewed speed.

The Black Witch was remarkably swift of foot, but Bill was "no slouch" of a runner.

He was soon gaining on her.

"I will have you in a minute," he thought.

But he was not destined to capture her.

The woman cast a look over her shoulder and saw the pursuing man was close at her heels. Then, for a little she darted forward more swiftly.

Suddenly she plunged into the shadows by

some rocks, and Wild Bill followed closely. As he did so, another figure arose out of the blackness. He saw a swinging motion and tried to dodge, throwing up one arm.

Then it seemed as if a ball of fire burst with a tremendous crash in his brain.

CHAPTER XI.

BILL ON THE TRAIL.

THE Pistol King had been struck down, and for some time he lay in an unconscious condition.

Finally he stirred and uttered a groan. Within another minute, he sat up and stared blankly around.

"Where—what—when?"

Those words came from his lips, showing how great was his bewilderment.

"Spooks and hobgoblins! am I alive, or am I not? Is this you, Bill, or is it somebody else? Those are important questions. Will somebody please rise up and answer?"

His head was throbbing with a terrible pain, and his left arm felt as if it were broken.

"I think a mountain must have fell on me," he said, speaking to himself, "and it was a very heavy mountain, too. It made me tired, and I took a rest."

"But, I wonder if this arm is in working order, or is it out of repair?"

He examined his arm carefully, and was delighted to find it was not broken.

"All right there," he muttered. "Now to see if my head is whole. It feels cracked."

His sombrero had protected his head so the scalp had not been broken, and Bill felt not a little thankful when he found this out.

"I am all right," he said, grimly; "but I would like to have a little session with the galoot who hit me that belt. I would entertain him to the best of my ability. The woman fled into the shadows here, and he was crouching among these rocks. When I came along, he rose up and let me have for all he was worth. It was a settler, and that is a fact!"

"But why didn't they kill me and have the job over with? That is what sticks me. That black creature claims to be my deadly foe, yet, when I was down, she does not take the advantage of it. Well, things are getting very warm in these parts, and that is a fact."

Bill scarcely thought either the Witch or her companion were lingering around, but he took the pains to look about. He was not rewarded by a discovery.

Then he turned his steps back toward the cabin.

By this time the moon had slipped well down to the crest, and half the valley was in shadow. Bill took the precaution to go all around the cabin and make sure no one was in the vicinity. Then he went to the spring and bathed his head and arm, after which he felt much better.

He was not a little chagrined by the outcome of his pursuit of the black woman, but he had to make the best of it.

"A crisis is at hand," he murmured, as he stood looking up at the place where Nervy Ned had seen the lights shine out. "Perhaps a band of our enemies are up there now, waiting for the time to come to down us. We must be constantly on our guard."

The remainder of the night passed without anything in particular taking place. Bill had determined not to tell his comrades of his adventure with the Black Witch, but in the morning he changed his mind enough to inform Nervy Ned of all that had occurred. The young man listened with interest.

"Bill," he said, "do you know, the night you got up and left the cabin so suddenly, and afterward claimed you thought one of the horses was down, I thought that was not the reason for your action."

"It was not."

"This black woman—"

"Had been looking in at the open window."

"And do you think she sent you that written warning?"

"Who else could have sent it?"

"That is something I cannot answer. But, how came it within the cabin?"

"You tell?"

"I cannot. It has been a puzzle to me."

"If this black creature was a spook—but I reckon she is flesh and blood."

"Spirits, if there are such things, do not send warnings written on scraps of paper."

"Nary time!"

"Bill."

"Well?"

"I believe one of our party will bear watching."

The Pistol King started.

"Who?" he asked.

"Ginger Jim!"

"Why, the fellow is nothing but a braggart; there is no harm in him."

Ned shook his head.

"Perhaps not; but I am not so sure of that. Anyway, I am going to keep my eyes on him."

"That won't hurt anything."

"His bragging air may be assumed—likewise, his apparent cowardice."

"It is not impossible."

"It may be all a trick to fool us."

"That is so."

The two men were silent for some moments, then Ned said, with startling suddenness:

"Bill."

"Yes, pard."

"You are going to attempt trailing down the ones who stole our horses?"

"I am."

"Well, I want you to hurry back as soon as you can."

"I'll do that, pard; but I mean to know what has become of those animals, if I have to follow them into Montana."

"I feel as if something may happen while you are away."

"Don't get shaky, lad; the chances are, nothing will happen any quicker while I am away than while I am here."

"But, you would be one more fighting man with the party."

Bill nodded.

"I understand; you are looking for trouble. Well, I will do my level best about getting back, rest easy as to that. Meantime, put Old Zeb onto anything you may discover. He is to be fully trusted."

With this, Bill turned away and began to pay his attention to picking up the trail of the stolen horses. That was not near so difficult as he had anticipated, and he soon bade his comrades good-by.

The little party watched the scout till he had disappeared from view, then Big Bruno turned away, shaking his head soberly, and saying:

"I almost feel as if we should never see him again."

"What d'yer mean by that?" demanded Crab Zeb.

"No more than I said. Something tells me Bill will never return."

"Do you insinuate he will packachee?"

"No, not that; but I believe the Hills abound with dangers."

Zeb gave a snort of disgust.

"Wal, you 'low Wild Bill ter look out fer Number One!" he said, decidedly. "Thar don't no red-skin git his skelp very easy, an' as fer ary white skunk downin' him— Wa-al, they hain't bin able ter do that leetle trick so fur."

"Bill hed oughter taken me 'long with him," said Ginger Jim. "Ef ther Injuns hed tackled him then, he'd hed somebody clost by ter 'fended him frum them."

"Wa-al, we may need your 'fendin' hyer afore he gits back," drawled the old prospector.

"Good gracious!" squawked Jim. "You don't reely think that's any danger, do ye?"

"Jest like' ez not, thar's fifty reds away up yon, watchin' this place now."

Ginger took one look toward the spot indicated by the old man's gesture, then he gave a yoop of genuine fear and plunged into the cabin.

"Thet's ther kind o'er red-skin extarninator he is!" said Crab Zeb, in disgust.

Wild Bill was an expert trailer, and he was able to follow the stolen horses much more swiftly than he had dared hope to do. At places he would be bothered a little, or compelled to go slow; but the nature of the ground seemed to compel this. He began to believe the thieves had made no effort to cover the trail.

"Perhaps I see their little game," he muttered, as he swung along, his Winchester ready for quick use, if necessary. "They thought they might have some trouble in covering the trail so I could not follow it, so they make no attempt to do so. If that is true, then they will lay an ambush for me, I reckon. I must be on the outlook, or I shall stumble into a trap."

Wilder and wilder grew the country, as he penetrated still further into the Hills. The scenery was picturesque, but Wild Bill had no eyes for the beauties of nature just then. He was attending strictly to business.

At length, he detected the first deliberate attempt to cover the trail, but it was such a poor one that he laughed to himself.

"That wouldn't fool a baby," he said. "Let's see if they try it again. If they do not, I shall think this was not a real attempt to cover the trail, but was a bluff."

Before long he came upon still another attempt to blind the trail, and it was much better than the first.

"This looks like business," he muttered, scowling a bit. "Still, I do not think it will puzzle me very much."

He was obliged to spend an hour in picking up the trail, much to his dismay, for he did not wish to lose time.

Once more he went onward. Mid-day came, and it found him studying over a third attempt to deceive any one who might be trailing the animals. They had taken to a stream of water, and he was forced to travel up and down the creek on both sides for a long distance before he again found the trail. Even then it was not easy to find. The horses had not left the water at any place that offered, but, as Bill had imagined might be the case, they had come out on ground that would leave scarce the ghost of a trail.

It was looking for just such a place that Bill succeeded in striking the track again. He saw the creatures' feet had been muffled, and had he simply looked for the marks they would naturally have made, he would have lost the trail right there.

He laughed aloud when he came to the place where the mufflers were removed.

"Ten to one that was their last resort!" he cried. "I don't believe they will try it again."

He was right. The trail from that forward was easy to follow.

But Bill was destined to come on a surprise that would nearly take away his breath. He found the spot where it seemed the horses had been left for the night, and he found something more.

"Injun sign, by the heavens!" he cried. "Those animals were discovered by red-skins and carried off! Just what does that mean?"

It did not take his active brain long to reason out the probable meaning.

"Either those whites are in with the red imps or the horses were stolen from them in turn!" he decided. "It looks as if the former was the right of the affair, but it may not be so. In case it is not, then I may be in a trap at this very minute!"

"If the reds found the horses here, they have probably set an ambush for the ones who left them, for they would know the animals belonged to whites."

The thought was not a pleasant one, for Bill knew a red-skin might be drawing bead on his heart at that very moment. Perhaps the Indians had seen he was trailing the horses, and had held their fire to watch his further movements.

Without appearing to do so purposely, Bill moved toward the cover of some bushes, into which he darted like a flash, at the first opportunity.

He was not an instant too soon.

The crack of a rifle rung out, and a bullet flipped a bit of fringe from his leggings.

"That settles that!" came grimly from the Pistol King's lips, as he peered from his covert. "One or more of the red imps spotted me. I see where the bit of smoke is rising, and I mean to have that red buck's top-knot before another hour passes."

He looked around to see if there was no way of escaping from his present situation, and to his delight, he discovered a gully-like fissure that led down among a mass of ragged boulders. He lost not a moment in taking to the gully, creeping down upon his stomach, pushing his rifle along ahead of him.

Had Bill risen on his hands and knees, he would have exposed himself to the keen-eyed red-skin who came so near lodging a bullet in his body a short time before.

But he was used to crawling, as well as fighting, and he did not waste any time in getting down amid the rocks.

Once out of the gully, he skulked along in a crouching position, every sense on the alert, ready for instant action.

"I must obtain a position where I can get sight of that red whelp," he thought.

He knew it was not at all likely the Indian would remain in the place where he had been when the shot was fired, so, as soon as he could, he studied the lay of the land, seeking to discover which way the Indian would be apt to move.

He was not long in deciding there was but one way he could leave his covert, and then Bill planned to get sight of him as he was creeping to another hiding-place.

"Ten to one he will think I am still concealed in those bushes," thought the scout. "If he does, he will plan to keep himself hidden

from that point. If I can reach those rocks up there—"

He did not finish, but began making his way toward the rocks. He reached them easier than he had thought possible, and then he lay waiting for his red foe to expose himself.

The time came.

Bill caught sight of a dusky form that flitted from rock to rock.

The crack of the white man's rifle was followed by a yell of mortal anguish.

CHAPTER XII.

A CLOSE SHAVE AND A FEARFUL DISCOVERY.

WILD BILL had not missed his hunting game.

"I wonder if there are any more," he muttered, as he swiftly changed his position. "There may be two or three others on the watch. It does not seem possible the reds would have left one man to watch the spot."

He took great precautions not to show himself too boldly, and, contrary to his usual custom, he did not approach the body of the Indian he had shot.

"You may keep your hair," he said softly; "and much good may it do you on your trip to the Happy Hunting-Grounds. I will light out of this, and so retain my own top-knot."

He stole swiftly away, and he was able to take up the trail of the stolen horses at a considerable distance from where they had fallen into the hands of the red-skins.

He decided there had been a dozen of the reds in the party. In places he could detect the shoe-marks of the stolen horses amid the other marks made by the unshod feet of the Indians' animals.

"There may be a large hunting party in the Hills," thought Bill. "If so, we shall be in great danger, for they will probably break into small squads and scour the section for the owners of the horses which have fallen into their hands."

He felt as if it were somewhat doubtful about getting possession of the stolen horses, but still he was determined to make the attempt, providing the opportunity was offered.

The lone trailer was able to move forward more swiftly after discovering the animals had fallen into red hands, for the Indians made no effort to conceal their trail, a thing which showed they were confident of their own strength.

Bill knew well enough the red-men felt themselves able to wipe out any whites who had strayed into the Hills, and he also knew they would promptly do so. While drawing their supplies at the Government Agencies, the Indians would profess the most friendly feelings for their "white brothers," but let one of those light-complexioned brothers be found in the heart of the red-skin Reservation and his goose was cooked. His fate was liable to remain a mystery for all time.

Of course, the pale-faces had no right to penetrate the Black Hills and mine for gold on the ground that properly belonged to the Sioux; but the yellow metal has a great allurement for the "civilized animal," and he will drag his weary bones to the very ends of the earth if there is any hope of finding and digging a fortune from the ground.

I know of but one thing so fascinating as gold mining, and that is gambling for high stakes.

Wild Bill had seen so much of Indian treachery and deviltry, that he had become a hearty hater of the "untamed savage." Bill was naturally an honorable and conscientious man, but, like many another plainsman, he had grown to look upon the Indian as having few rights white men were bound to respect.

Of what value was the hidden gold of the Black Hills to the red-men? They were too lazy to extract the precious metal from the ground, even though they knew it would buy them every comfort they could ask.

The Indian takes no thought of to-morrow. When the summer sun hung bright and warm over mountains and plain, they spent their days in idleness, the hunt providing them with game from day to day. They would dream away the best part of the year.

When winter came, they rushed to the agencies, and there they would shiver and starve, waiting for spring to break the white seal and unlock the ice-imprisoned land.

It is certain the Sioux knew gold abounded in the Black Hills, and they knew it long before its existence there was made known to the civilized world. But what good did the knowledge do them? Occasionally a red-skin would be seen in possession of a valuable nugget he had picked up quite by accident, but they never made themselves tired searching after the precious metal.

But the red-skins were crafty, and they well

understood what a value the whites set upon gold. Those who were seen with the yellow nuggets told vague stories about their discovery, and never told the truth.

The Indians also related awe-inspiring things about the Hills being the dwelling place of the Storm God.

It is true, that, as a rule, the red-skins shunned the Hills for anything but hunting purposes, and it is probable they were filled with fear by the terrific thunder-storms which swept over the section. But it is also true they did their best to fill the white man's mind with feelings of awe even greater than they experienced themselves.

All in vain!

Their fears were well-grounded. When it became known that there were valuable gold diggings amid the Black Hills, the pale-faces made a mad rush for the New Eldorado. Sitting Bull and the whole Sioux Nation, aided in a measure by Uncle Sam's blue-coated boys, could not stem the tide. The reds murdered and destroyed, and the soldiers "arrested" and turned back such daring men as they discovered bound for the Hills.

But Uncle Sam was forced to open up the new country, and the red-men were compelled to become docile.

But, reminiscences of those exciting days have led me from the thread of my story.

Wild Bill moved swiftly forward on the trail. But something told him he was being followed. He was a man who was always governed to a great extent by his feelings and impressions, and he never disregarded a warning of this kind.

"I've got to get to cover and wait for the copper-skinned party, or parties who are tracking me," he muttered.

In a short time he reached a spot that was favorable for his purpose, and he swiftly concealed himself.

He did not have to wait more than twenty minutes before he detected two crouching figures that were coming swiftly along on his track.

With a deadly light in his eyes, Bill waited till they were so near there could be no failure, then his Winchester spoke twice in such swift succession that the reports were almost as one.

Both of the unfortunate red trailers went down.

Quietly slipping some fresh cartridges into the magazine of his rifle, Bill watched till both the dusky bodies lay perfectly still and rigid, then he once more took up the trail.

For reasons unknown to himself, he did not touch their scalp-locks.

The sun was slipping down the western sky, and the trailer had not eaten anything since morning. Once he paused at a spring to drink.

Steadily on the trail continued the scout till darkness was at hand. With each passing minute the tracks grew fresher, and he knew he was close on the reds.

However, darkness came down and concealed the trail before he had overtaken them.

Thoroughly getting the lay of the land, so he felt sure he could return to the trail in the morning, if necessary, he struck out through the gathering shadows.

Within half an hour he found himself looking down into a pocket where a large band of Indians were encamped. There were nearly a hundred of them in all. Lodges had been temporarily erected and big fires built.

From his position, Bill could see the Indians moving about by the light of the fires, and he was able to form a pretty accurate estimation of their number. It was a hunting party, but he knew they were none the less dangerous for that reason.

"There will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth when they discover their three comrades have gone up the flume," thought the scout.

He was disgusted by his discovery, for he now saw the horses were gone for good. True, he might recover them by some daring venture, but it was equally true he would ruin their prospect of making a fortune from the placer of Moaning Gulch, if he did so.

Bill knew what bloodhound-like trailers the Indians were, and, if he recovered the horses and attempted to make his way back to his comrades, he would be followed every inch of the way. All his arts would be unavailing in throwing the reds off the track amid the Hills.

Had he thought it best to leave the Hills at once and give up the attempt to make a golden fortune there, he would have secured the horses at any risk. Then he would have depended on his own cleverness to cover the trail enough to puzzle the reds for a time and give himself and his friends a fair start.

He puzzled over the matter for some time, but finally decided to let the horses go for the time being. It was not likely the Indians would leave the Hills for some little time, and there would be another—perhaps better—opportunity to regain possession of the animals.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Bill determined to immediately retrace his steps. He crept back from the edge of the bluff and started away in the darkness.

Ragged clouds were trailing across the sky, now and then permitting the moon to show herself for a brief space of time.

The Pistol King had not gone a great distance before the moon suddenly came out, and he found himself face to face with eight or ten red-skins, who were making their way to the camp.

They saw him, and a yell of surprise went up. The next moment bullets rattled about Wild Bill's ears.

Dropping on one knee, the daring man began to work his rifle, and a perfect stream of fire seemed to pour from the muzzle of the deadly weapon.

A veritable hail of lead was poured upon the amazed Indians.

The rapidity with which Wild Bill worked his rifle was something astonishing.

A black cloud drifted across the face of the moon, and the fusilade ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

Then Bill started to skulk away amid the rocks.

But it suddenly seemed as if every shadow resolved itself into a red-skin.

He knew they were on every side of him, and the camp had certainly been aroused by the shots.

If he escaped at all, it must be at once and without delay.

With his rifle in his left hand and a knife grasped in his right, he darted here and there, weaving his way through the mass of moving shadows his keen eyes detected.

Suddenly a dark figure seemed to rise out of the ground, and confront him; long arms were outstretched to grasp him.

With a movement that seemed electrical, Wild Bill's right hand rose and fell.

The dark figure reeled backward, the death-yell of a savage pealing out on the night air.

Bill did not tarry in that vicinity.

He heard answering yells on three sides of him, and he knew he was almost surrounded.

He made toward the point from which no cry had come, and he nearly fell over the brink of a precipice.

"Trapped!"

He blissed the word, feeling he was truly snared.

Wild Bill was a man to die game, and he again sunk on one knee, ready for hot work.

As he did so, one hand touched a mass of vines which grew on the brink of the precipice.

A thrill ran through his heart.

"There may be a chance here!" he whispered.

"I will try it!"

In another moment his rifle was slung at his back, and both hands were revealing what his eyes could not see.

He discovered the vines trailed over the precipice, and, without a moment's hesitation, he swung over and went down, clinging fast to them.

His peril was something awful.

He knew not if the vines reached anywhere near the foot of the precipice, which might extend downward for hundreds of feet. Then, the vines might give way beneath his weight and let him go whirling down to death on the rocks.

The vines grew thinner and thinner as he descended, but the rocky wall beneath his feet projected out and gave him some support.

At length he was able to descend by clinging to the wall alone, abandoning the vines.

In a short time, he reached the bottom in safety, and a breath of relief came from his lips.

At the same moment, yells of disappointment and rage came from the tricked Indians above.

"Whoop as much as you like," thought Bill, as he hastened into the darkness. "Much good may it do you! You and I will part company right here."

Another day was breaking when Wild Bill reached the little valley where the cabin had been built near Moaning Gulch. He hurried forward, eager to greet his comrades. When he came out in sight of the spot where the cabin had stood, he suddenly halted and an exclamation of astonishment and dismay broke from his lips.

The cabin was gone!

In its place lay a mass of blackened embers, from which tiny wreaths of smoke were curling upward, showing the fire was not entirely dead.

But this was not the worst sight that greeted his eyes.

On the ground near the place where the cabin had stood were two human bodies.

"Good God!" cried Bill, as he hurried forward.

"My poor pard!"

A glance at the two bodies showed him they had been the victims of red-skin fiends.

"They are poor Old Zeb and Ginger Jim!" came hoarsely from the Pistol King's lips.

"But where are Ned and Big Bruno? They are not here. Did they perish in the flames? If not, what has become of them?"

What, indeed?

CHAPTER XIII. THE WORK OF RED FIENDS.

AFTER Wild Bill had left his comrades to go on the trail of the stolen horses, a misunderstanding arose about the matter of continuing work while he was away.

Crab Zeb was for taking a day off and remaining at the cabin, but Big Bruno thought they ought to work.

"Now, looker byer, Pard Bruno," said the old prospector, "you know as well as I that most likely our enemies are watchin' this yere place now. Mebbe they're only waitin' fer ther three o' us ter go down in ther gulch an' leave t'other one on guard 'fore they kem down on him an' snuff him out. In that thar way they c'u'd wipe us out one at a time, an' we'd never git one single whack back at 'em."

"I am willing to either watch or work," said the big man. "I will take my chances by remaining to guard the cabin, if any one else is afraid to do so."

"That's all right, but we want ter do ther best thing, so—"

"You want to be boss, now Bill is away!"

"Is that how ye figger it? Well, hev it that way, ef ye want ter. I am boss, an' I'll stay boss, too, Big Bruno. Ef ye don't think so—wa-al, try ter straddle me."

Bruno's hand fell on a weapon, but his wrist was grasped by Nervy Ned's strong fingers.

"Easy, pard!" cautioned the young man, speaking because he was forced to do so. "We can't afford to have a row and shoot each other. Quarreling among ourselves is scandalous, and Bill would be angry if he knew it."

"Who cares for Bill?"

"You would care for him if he were here."

"Bah! I care for no man!"

"I have always thought you a man of good judgment, Bruno, and I hope I shall not have to change my mind now. You are angry. Wait a little till you are cooler before you say any more."

The big fellow looked into the young man's eyes, and something he saw there caused him to think it best to follow that advice.

"All right," and his hand fell from the butt of his revolver. "You people can do as you please, and I will do the same."

Seeing the trouble was over, Ned left the cabin. He went down to the spot where he and Bill had talked the night before, and for a long time he sat on one of the boulders. He was thinking deeply.

The forenoon passed slowly enough to the four men. The little misunderstanding had raised a cloud that hung over them like a shadow. Even Ginger Jim forgot to boast.

As for Crab Zeb, there was an unusually sober look on his face. He was plainly troubled more than he cared to express, and it is possible he felt a foreboding of approaching doom.

The sun shone, but the little valley seemed unusually dark to Nervy Ned. There seemed to be a chill in the very air, and his blood flowed sluggishly in his veins.

"I don't like the feeling," he said, to himself. "It seems as if a calamity is at hand. I am sorry Bill had to go away."

The men ate their mid-day meal in grim silence. When it was over, Zeb and Jim lighted their pipes to smoke, while Ned returned to the boulder, where he could watch the dark mouth of Moaning Gulch.

Big Bruno went out in front of the cabin and strode back and forth, his face dark as a thunder-cloud and his hands clinched behind his back.

As Ned sat looking toward the opening to the mysterious gorge he began to feel a desire to go down there and listen to the wind. It was the same peculiar feeling of fascination that the place exercised over Wild Bill.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed, after a time.

He seemed to have forgotten his comrades, for

he arose to his feet and started toward the gorge, speaking no word to the others.

Big Bruno watched the young man till he had disappeared at the dark mouth of the weird Gulch.

Crab Zeb happened to come out of the cabin just in time to see Ned as he entered the Gulch.

"Waal, I like that, by Moses!" growled the old fellow. "Why didn't he say he wuz goin' down thar?"

"I don't suppose he thought it necessary to account for his actions to any one," said Big Bruno, insolently.

"Oh, ye don't!" snapped Zeb. "Waal, you might hev tolle me he wuz goin' off. Why didn't ye?"

"I didn't happen to feel that way."

Crab surveyed the big man from head to feet.

"I'd guv suthin' ter know why Bill ever tuck you 'long with us fer!" he said.

"You forget yourself, old man," declared Bruno. "Nobody took me along. I was the original discoverer, and I am really the head of the party. You other people were taken along, a thing you must see, if you have any sense at all."

Zeb wilted, but he was none the less angry. He retreated into the cabin, growling and grumbling.

Big Bruno entered in a short time. He did not even glance toward Zeb or Jim, but he deliberately took down his cartridge belt and buckled it about his waist. Then he took his rifle and went out.

Zeb grunted and went to the door.

Big Bruno strode straight away, never turning to look back. He did not go toward Moaning Gulch, but in an opposite direction.

"Waal, go on," growled the old prospector. "It won't be no great loss ef ye never come back!"

Meantime, Nervy Ned had gone down into the dark gorge and paused near the rockers. The wind was moaning gently, and the place was lonely, even though the sun hung bright in the sky.

After looking around the diggings for a time, Ned went to a boulder and sat down. There he fell into deep meditation.

How long he remained thus he did not know. It might have been but a short time, or it might have been hours.

He was aroused by shots, and he started to his feet. Then he faintly heard wild yells and more shots.

The sounds came down the gorge.

"Heavens! what can that mean?" cried the young man, and he started on a run toward the opening to the gorge.

In a short time he reached the opening, the sounds having grown plainer with each moment.

What a sight greeted his eyes when he reached a point where he could look out into the little valley!

A band of twenty red-skins were dancing around the cabin, which was already being swiftly wrapped in flames. The cabin door was wide open, showing the miners were not within.

Ned's eyes fell on two figures stretched on the ground, and he knew at least two of his comrades had met their fate.

At first the youth was tempted to rush out and attack the red devils, but his better judgment prevented so rash a move, for he saw the time was past when he could render his friends any assistance.

"It has come!" he groaned. "This is what I feared! The poor fellows have been butchered already!"

He watched the savages dancing and yelling about the burning cabin, and his heart was hot with rage.

"This is another score I have against the red devils!" came through his set teeth. "They have robbed me of very much. I think I may become an Indian-hater—possibly a hunter of the red dogs!"

He did not think of his own danger then, but he realized it when he saw some of the red-skins motioning toward the gorge. Then they seemed to hold an animated discussion, some of them seeming to be for visiting the gorge, while others opposed it. The awe of the place was strong on some of the band, but the bolder ones prevailed, and a small party of warriors started toward the mysterious Gulch.

Ned saw them coming, and then he understood how critical was his position.

"I shall be fortunate if I escape them!" he thought, as he burried back into the shadows of the place.

The wind seemed hushed; there was not even a murmur. The silence was oppressive and ominous. Death seemed lurking in the air.

As he hurried along, Ned remembered a niche to which he had climbed one day. It was quite a distance up one side of the canyon wall, and he wondered if he could not conceal himself there.

"It is a natural fortress," thought the youth. "I can defend it to the last gasp. The only way they can get at me is to starve me out. I believe I shall take my chances to hide there."

Swiftly he ran to the place and began climbing up the rocks. He kept his head, for he knew it would not do to become excited then. His life was in peril, and his nerve must stand by him in the emergency.

He made no slips, for he knew a slip might cost him his life. He grasped every point of rock firmly, and was careful of his footholds.

In this manner he mounted to the place where he was able to conceal himself on a ledge which seemed almost inaccessible. His exertions caused him to breathe heavily, but he immediately looked to his revolvers.

They were ready and in working order.

Then he waited for the approach of the red-skins. The silence of the wind seemed unnatural and did more to unman him than anything else. But he did not allow that to trouble him much. With his face stern and hard-set, he waited.

The Indians seemed a long time appearing. He almost began to think they had turned back, but he resolved not to venture from his retreat and be caught.

At length the wind began to moan faintly. The sound was pitiful in the extreme, and it almost brought the tears to Ned's eyes, for he fancied it seemed moaning over the miners who had met death at the hands of the red-men.

"That wind seems like a human being," the youth thought. "It almost appears to reason. That sound—how like the sobbing of a living creature!"

"But where can those red—Ha!"

He saw the Indians. They were advancing slowly and cautiously along the Gulch. They seemed frightened or filled with awe, and it was plain it would not take much to send them skurrying out of the place.

Ned watched them as they came on. He had suddenly grown as cool as usual, and he did not seem to feel himself in such dreadful danger. For some reason, he knew not what, he waited for an unexpected event to transpire.

What was to happen down there amid the somber shadows of Moaning Gulch?

CHAPTER XIV.

"NOT FRIENDS—DEADLY FOES!"

THE question was soon answered.

The Indians were moving along close to one of the black walls of the gulch.

Suddenly there was a crunching sound above and a rushing noise in the air!

Downward shot a huge boulder, that in some way had become detached from its resting-place far above!

The red-skins were beneath it!

The boulder was a thunderbolt of death. Down upon the unfortunate savages it came, and all but two were instantly killed.

They never knew what struck them.

Then, of a sudden, the wind began to utter shriek after shriek, till the gorge fairly echoed with the blood-curdling sounds.

For a few seconds the two savages who had escaped death stood appalled at the fate of their comrades. They appeared frozen with terror.

There was something fiendish in the cries which echoed through the dismal Gulch, and it was not strange the sounds filled the red-skins with horror.

For a few moments they stood still, then they turned and fled, as if pursued by a score of fiends.

The two red-skins who escaped could scarcely have been more amazed than was the pale-face beholder of the tragedy. It seemed to him almost as if the hand of angry Heaven had avenged the murder of his comrades.

Many times he had traversed that gorge, but never had he noticed that there was a boulder clinging to the rugged wall, threatening to fall at any time.

"It seems to me there must have been a power that sent that big stone down upon them," he muttered.

Suddenly a shrill voice rung through the gorge, crying:

"Elbert Wyndal, of the party who came here

to seek for gold, you alone shall escape! The others shall die amid these Hills! Fly, fly, while there is time and opportunity!"

It was not a trick of his imagination—he plainly and distinctly heard the words. He started up, gazing around, but he saw no living person.

"Great Heaven!" he gasped. "Who was it that spoke? Some one who knows my name! What is the meaning of this?"

Once more he heard the voice:

"Be warned! Fly from this gorge as you would fly from death itself! There is nothing but misfortune for those who come here—misfortune and death!"

His teeth came together with a click.

"All right," he muttered. "I am getting to think that way myself, and I am ready to leave this place just as soon as I can get out."

He no longer remained crouching behind the rocks. He felt sure the reds would not venture back into the Gulch, for they had seen quite enough to make them think the wrath of the Great Spirit fell on those who penetrated the dark depths.

Ned swung himself down to the bottom of the Gulch. There he hesitated a moment, but there was but one course for him to follow. He could not go out by the valley where the cabin had stood, so he turned the other way.

Passing the rockers, he hurried into the shadows of the uncanny gorge. On and on he went, taking little heed of his surroundings. He did not note the flight of time, but it was sunset when he left the dark Gulch.

Out among the Hills he breathed more freely, but he knew not which way to turn. His situation was more desperate than he dreamed, for he did not even have his rifle with which to provide for his hunger. Such game as he secured, he would have to bring down with his revolvers.

And his horse was gone. How was he to get out of the Hills and make his way to the settlements?

That was an unanswerable question just then.

Darkness came down and found Ned wandering aimlessly. He hardly knew what to do when he realized night was fairly upon him.

"If Bill was with me now, everything would be all right," he thought. "He is used to any kind of life in this part of the country, and, with him, I should not feel so completely lost and adrift."

Then the thought came to him that he ought to return to the valley, where his comrades had been murdered and bury them.

But he knew he could not reach the ill-fated spot that night, for he knew not which way to turn.

At length, he decided to seek a secluded spot somewhere, and attempt to get some sleep. With this in view, he found his way down into a small pocket.

"All at once, he detected the glimmer of a light not far away.

"Indians!"

That was his first thought, and his impulse was to turn and flee. But Ned's nerves were not entirely beyond his control, and he compelled himself to creep slowly and cautiously forward, instead of retreating.

Not a noise did he make as he stole toward the glimmering fire. He had decided to satisfy himself if the parties near it were really redskins. He had little hope of their being whites, for the country was not a "healthy" one for pale-faces.

Even though they were white men, they might be the ones who came down on Big Bruno and claimed the placer in Moaning Gulch. He might have unwittingly discovered the horse-thieves.

At length the murmur of voices came to his ears, and he was soon able to tell that the speakers were really white men.

Of course this discovery gave him hope, but he was not foolish enough to rashly expose himself without learning something of the men by the fire.

In a little while he had obtained a position where he could see them, as they were exposed by the flames. He could also hear a part of their conversation, and this was the first that reached his ears:

"Really, Bat, I should think you would be afraid this fire would bring the reds down on us. You know they can smell smoke, even when they are not able to see a light."

Ned could scarcely believe the evidence of his ears and eyes. Was it possible, or was it a trick of the imagination?

Could that be Big Bruno?

Yes, there was no doubt about it. The fire-light fell fairly on his face. It was the dark-

faced giant whom Ned had to this moment believed one of the red-skins' victims.

How came the big fellow there? Ned asked himself the question in vain. He could think of no probable way of Big Bruno's escape from the red-skin horde. That he was not a friend of the savages was apparent from the question he addressed to his companion.

And that companion—

The youth gave a gasp of astonishment. Were there two Big Brunos? No, that was impossible; but certainly the two men were brothers.

That was the true explanation. Big Bruno and Black Bat were brothers.

Bruno had believed his brother Bat dead, for it had been reported he was lynched in Texas by Vigilantes. But the story was not true, although Bat certainly deserved lynching if ever border desperado merited such fate.

Bat was known as a "killer," and he had the blood of many a man on his hands. Unfortunately for his good name, he had almost always killed honest men, instead of confining his desire for shedding blood to those of his own class.

It happened that Phil Cole had once done Bat Bradstone a favor, and Bat swore by Cole from that time on. When he heard Wild Bill had killed Cole in Abilene, Kansas, while attempting to arrest him, Cole being on a drunken rampage, Black Bat swore he would have Bill's life, if they ever met.

It happened that Big Bruno also secretly hated Bill, although he had no good reason for doing so. Even before he knew his brother was still living, he had played a trick on Bill, knowing the Pistol King was of a very superstitious nature.

I refer to the finding of the knife and the warning signed by the "Black Witch." Bruno had found the warning pinned to the cabin door with the dagger, and he had taken possession of it.

In order to puzzle Bill still more, Bat had fastened the warning to the interior of the cabin during the night, and the scout had found it in the morning. It had really seemed a marvelous thing that the dagger and warning had found their way into the securely fastened cabin.

But Big Bruno's most daring trick was worked in connection with the stealing of the horses. When he found his brother Bat was still alive and heard from Bat's lips how he hated Wild Bill, Bruno readily agreed to work against the man who trusted him as a pard.

The loss of the horses would be a terrible blow, for on the animals they depended in getting out of the Hills, so it was decided to get away with them.

At the same time, Bruno wished to remain in the confidence of the men against whom he was turning traitor. He knew how shrewd Wild Bill usually was in detecting a cheat, and he felt that no ordinary cock and bull story would be accepted.

Then he carried into execution a daring plan. He knew exactly where to inflict a small cut on his head so it would bleed profusely, and this he did, smearing his face with the blood. Then he had his brother bind his hands and feet and arrange a gag so he could slip it into his mouth when he heard Bill and his pards approaching.

The reader knows how well the plan worked. Mexican Pete took the horses in charge, promising to cover their trail and then return with them to his comrades.

They never saw him again!

Just what happened to the Greaser was never known, but it is pretty certain he considered the horses booty enough for him, and he resolved to get away with them. Possibly he found himself tracked by red-skins and deserted the animals, only to perish amid the Hills.

If Big Bruno was not suspected by his companions he was to flash a light at the cabin window three times, and the signal would be answered from the crest of the slope fifteen minutes later.

The big Judas did not find a very good opportunity to carry out his plans of signaling, but he made bold to do it before some of the very ones he had betrayed. Twice the breeze blew the light out, and for the third time he closed the window.

A short time later he went outside to see if the signals had been seen and were answered.

Nervy Ned saw the answer.

After the quarrel with Crab Zeb, Bruno resolved to have a talk with his brother and lay future plans. That was why he took his rifle and strode away, as if furiously angry.

And in that manner, he saved his scalp.

Nervy Ned gazed in wonder at the two men, failing to notice a third figure beyond the fire.

"I scarcely think the reds will detect us here," answered Black Bat. "If they do—"

"Well, what then?"

"We should lose our scalps," said Revolver Ray, arising to his feet.

Then came the greatest surprise of all for Nervy Ned. A cry of wonder broke from his lips. Did he see a spirit?

The three men heard that cry and their hands fell on ready weapons.

The next moment Ned appeared within the circle of firelight, and the two younger men were face to face.

"Seba Rankin," shouted Ned. "Is it you?"

The Revolver Sharp drew back.

"Yes, I am Seba Rankin," he acknowledged.

"And you—"

"I am Bert Wyndal."

"Impossible!"

"It is true."

"Bert Wyndal is dead!"

"No, I still live. But I thought you dead, for I saw you fall. Even now it does not seem possible you are alive. Let me grip your hand, old schoolmate, to make sure I am not deceived!"

But Rankin would not accept the proffered hand.

"There is no mistake," came coldly from his lips. "I am here in the flesh, but you are the last person I expected or hoped to see."

Ned recoiled, a look of astonishment on his face.

"What—what are you saying?" he stammered.

"Is it necessary to repeat?"

"I am not sure I heard aright."

"I think you did, unless there is something the matter with your ears. I tried to make it plain I believed you dead and hoped you were. That is the straight unvarnished truth."

"But, Seba, we are old schoolmates—friends!"

"No!" cried the Revolver Sharp, his face betraying the hatred in his soul—"not friends—deadly foes!"

CHAPTER XV.

TRICKED BY THE WITCH.

THE words were like blows, and before Ned could recover, he was grasped behind and flung to the ground.

"That is right!" nodded Revolver Ray, or Seba Rankin, as he will hereafter be called. "Make him secure."

The three men flung themselves on the unlucky youth, and he was soon bound hands and feet, despite his struggles.

"Cowards! Traitors!" he cried.

But they only laughed at him.

"I thought the reds had wiped you out," said Big Bruno; "but it seems you escaped them."

"And I thought they had wiped you out. Plainly, it would have been better for the country if they had."

The big fellow scowled, then laughed again. He could afford to be merry just then, he thought.

"That is the way you look at it."

"You are a traitor!"

"That is a harsh word."

"But it is true."

"Not exactly. You see, this gentleman here is my brother, and a man should always stand by his brother. He claims to be the original discoverer of the placer in Moaning Gulch, so I have decided to withdraw in his favor. You other people are in the way, since he has taken me in as a partner. The red-skins were very kind in disposing of Old Zeb and that fool Ginger Jack. You have fallen into our hands, and it only remains to dispose of Wild Bill."

"Leave him to me!" grated Black Bat. "I will finish him!"

"Thus, you see, my young friend, another party has been formed to work the placer, and you have no further interest in it."

Ned, or, properly Bert, for it is best to drop his fictitious name at this point, could make no reply. He fully understood what a dastardly creature Bruno Bradstone was, and the thought came to him that poor blustering Ginger Jack was a king beside the man. He had fancied Jim the traitor, but he now understood his mistake.

It was not strange the captive youth should be somewhat dazed by the turn things had taken. He had believed Rankin dead, but the man lived. In the past they had been friends, though rivals; but now Rankin declared they were deadly foes.

The captive was unceremoniously dragged to a place where he could sit with his back against a tree, then, after casting some more wood on the fire, Seba Rankin came and crouched before his old schoolmate.

"I know you are wondering how it happens I am here alive," he said: "and your appearance also puzzles me. I thought the red devils had finished you, but it seems you escaped some way. I care not how you did so, but I am sorry. As for myself, I would have been a dead man only for the tattooing on my breast. When I fell, wounded, I gasped for breath and tore open my shirt, exposing the strange symbol. The redskins saw it, and not one of them would touch me. I was left for dead amid the other bodies, but I was not dead, by any means."

"You were fortunate, Seba," said Bert, holding himself in check.

"Well, you will find it was an unfortunate thing for you," was the savage retort. "You poor fool! You thought me still your friend, but I was your secret enemy. Do you remember our first quarrel, when you struck me?"

"I see you do. Well, you also remember I swore I would make you sorry for that blow. Afterwards, we seemed to become friends again, but I never for a moment forgot my oath. I meant to keep it, and I will do so."

"Treacherous wretch!"

"You must remember hard words never broke any bones. I hated you, even though I pretended to be your friend, and I resolved to win Anice Aldrich, by fair means or foul. All the while I saw you getting the best of me in open struggle, I was plotting to carry out some move that should defeat and ruin you. You were such an honest young man it was difficult for me to get a hold on you."

"I resolved on a desperate move, and I asked Anice to marry me. She declined. Then I made her promise to not let you know I had asked her to be my wife."

"Next, I set about planning to get rid of you. I was not fool enough to murder you there, even though my heart prompted me to do so. I knew the crime would be traced to me, and thus I would ruin everything."

"You will remember I was the one who proposed coming West to make our fortunes. At first you did not take to the scheme, but I urged and excited you till you grew enthusiastic. That was a part of my plot."

"I was afraid you would marry Anice before you started, but my fears were groundless."

"My scheme was simple. Away out in the mountains I would find a way to get rid of you, then I could return to Anice. I had practiced till I could imitate your handwriting, and I proposed to take back a letter to her, which was apparently written when you were dying. In that letter would be a mess of stuff about how kind I had been to you, and it was to end with the request that Anice become my wife. As it was apparently your dying wish, of course she would comply—and thus I would win the prize."

"You treacherous dog!" hoarsely breathed Bert Wyndal, fairly shaking with the fury he felt.

"Now I am making you sorry for that blow!" cried Rankin.

"No! Instead of making me sorry, you make me wish I had killed you when I struck!"

"Well, sorry or not, I am having my revenge."

"Much good may it do you!"

"Now, don't you worry a bit about that. I shall get out of it all the satisfaction possible."

"You lied to me when you told me Anice had also promised to become your wife!"

"I did."

"I knew it at the time! Oh, fool, fool! I ought to have seen your treachery! Was I blind?"

"Somewhat, I think."

"And I think so, too!"

Big Bruno and Black Bat were listening to all that passed, seeming to enjoy it as well as a farce.

Rankin continued:

"The redskins prevented me from carrying out my plans, and I fancied they had saved me the trouble of killing you. Now, I see I was mistaken."

"I will not tell you how I succeeded in reaching the nearest settlement after the massacre occurred. I dragged myself there, more dead than alive, and there I was cared for till my health was restored."

"At first, I thought of writing to Anice and telling her all; but I changed my mind. Wild tales of new gold discoveries in the Salt River section were afloat, and I made for those parts. I did not write to Anice then, and I put it off for a long time."

"Whom do you suppose I found in a small Arizona camp? You could not guess, if you tried, but it was Stephen Aldrich!"

"Anice's father!"

"Yes."

"Are you lying, Seba Rankin?"

"No. Why should I lie to you now? You are close to death, and I want you to know the truth. I actually found the man, but there seemed to be some trouble with his head. He fancied himself a fugitive from justice, and that was why he had not written to his wife for so many years."

"I tried to get the notion out of his head, but I succeeded very poorly. I could not persuade him to write or return East with me. He had been unfortunate, and was living like a beggar."

"I wrote then, and I told Anice all that had happened. I told her you were dead. I told her I had found her father. She answered, and her letter showed me she was nearly heart-broken. She said her mother was very sick—was at the door of death. I managed to raise some money, and I sent it all to her."

"Not even the fact that his wife was dying could induce Stephen Aldrich to return to Illinois. The thought of doing so filled him with terror."

"After a time, Anice wrote her mother was dead and she was all alone in the world. Then I planned to have her come West. At the request of Aldrich, I had cautioned her against letting any one know her father still lived. I also took a fancy to have her leave home without revealing whether she was bound."

"Stephen agreed to meet his child in Omaha, and I directed her to come to that place. It happened I was engaged in a scheme to make a pot of money about that time, and I was not able to go to Omaha with him, as I had intended. However, he promised to bring her straight to me."

"Well, he did not keep his word—"

"For which I thank God!" exclaimed Bert Wyndal.

"Then you are thanking God for the death of the girl you loved, for his folly cost the lives of both."

"Better death for her than that she should fall into your vile hands!"

"Is that the way you look at it? Well, have it so, if you like."

"Aldrich did not come on from Omaha. I wrote, but received no answer. Then I became excited, and I lost no time in going there. Although I am something of a detective by nature, it took me quite a little while to trace them. Then I discovered they had joined a wagon-train, bound for—where?"

"That was an unanswerable. Some thought the train was bound for the northern part of the Territory, but no one seemed certain. Then I set about tracing the train, and I have been at it ever since. I have at last become satisfied it was destroyed by Indians."

"It was the search for the train that brought me to these Hills, for I did not know but their destination was here. I have found nothing to convince me I was right. The fate of Stephen Aldrich and little Anice is wrapped in mystery."

"The same thing brought me here—it has brought us face to face."

"And brought you to your death!"

"Would you kill me, now there is nothing to gain by it?"

"There is something to gain."

"What?"

"Revenge!"

Seba Rankin's face was little short of fiendish, as he uttered the word.

"You hate me because—"

"Because Anice loved you! That is the simple truth, I confess."

"What a miserable creature you are!"

Rankin shrunk before the scorn expressed in those words, and the savage look on his face grew deeper. His hand crept toward his belt.

Suddenly, without the least warning, a female figure seemed to rise up in their very midst.

It was the Black Witch of Moaning Gulch!

A hissing sound came from her lips.

"Danger!" she said, softly. "There are redskins on every hand! You are surrounded, and they are creeping down upon you! You must take to the darkness and try to save yourselves!"

"Not till I have had Bert Wyndal's blood!" grated Rankin, as, knife in hand, he bent toward the captive.

With a push of her foot, the Black Witch sent him sprawling on his back. Then she snatched a blanket from her shoulders and flung it over the fire, burying the camp in darkness!

So sudden and unexpected had been the movement that every one was astonished.

Black Bat was the first to recover.

Leaping forward, he tore the blanket aside, and the fire leaped up again.

Cries of anger broke from the lips of the three rascals, for they saw they had been tricked.

The Black Witch was gone, and the captive had also disappeared!

Hearing a noise in the darkness, Black Bat wheeled, snatched out a revolver and fired toward the spot.

CHAPTER XVI.

WILD BILL'S SECRET.

THE moment the blanket settled over the fire, Bert Wyndal felt a sharp knife sever his bonds. Then a hand fell on his wrist, and he was pulled to his feet. In another moment, he was hurrying away, guided by the weird woman of Moaning Gulch.

Suddenly the light blazed out behind them, and, a moment later, the report of a revolver was heard.

Bert felt the black-faced woman give a start, but they still hurried on. They were pursued, but the Witch easily gave the slip to those who were following.

"Where are we going?" asked Bert.

"To a place of safety," was the reply. "There is but one safe place amid these Hills; I will take you there. I did not mean to do so, but the little girl is calling and calling for you, and my heart softened. All the others must die: you alone shall escape."

Bert's heart gave a strange leap.

"The little girl?" he repeated. "What little girl do you mean?"

"Wait—you shall see."

He was forced to be content with that.

Through the night they made their way till Moaning Gulch was reached. Although he did not know it, Bert had not traveled so very far from the mysterious gorge.

Down into the uncanny place they hastened. At a certain point not a great distance from the rockers, the Witch paused and fumbled with the stone wall.

A black opening appeared before them.

"Go in," she said.

The young man did not hesitate. He halted after entering. There came a soft grating sound, and then he knew the cunningly contrived door had closed behind him.

He was in the densest darkness.

"Come."

The voice of the Black Witch was strangely weak, and the hand which touched his wrist seemed growing cold. He shuddered, but permitted the woman to guide him.

For a short time they advanced through the darkness, then they ascended a long flight of stone steps.

Suddenly and most unexpectedly Bert found himself in a lighted chamber.

There were two persons in the chamber. One was a man of fifty, with gray hair and beard, and the other—

"God in Heaven! Anice, is it you?"

Bert almost shouted the words.

The beautiful girl started forward, her hands outstretched.

"Bert, Bert!" she gasped. "They said I was deceived by a likeness—they said you were dead! Is it really you, Bert?"

Then she was folded in his arms, and words cannot express the wonder and mad joy in his heart.

It was really Anice Aldrich, alive and well.

And the man was Stephen Aldrich.

Bert Wyndal could not realize he was not dreaming, for it seemed too good—too strange—to be true.

How the girl clung to him, and then, when she felt his kisses—when she felt the lips of the one she had thought dead—she fainted.

Tenderly the joyous lover bore her to a rude couch close at hand, and, with her father's aid, she was soon restored to consciousness.

"Young man," said Stephen Aldrich, "I am happy to learn the story of your death was not true. It has nearly killed my child, but now I hope she will become herself once more."

Anice clung to Bert, saying brokenly:

"Oh, Bert! can you know what it is to believe the one you love so dearly is dead and lost to you forever?"

"Yes, my little darling," he replied, "for I thought you were dead. I have been searching for you, oh, so long! And I could find no trace. I had begun to believe the Mansfield wagon-train had been destroyed by Indians."

"And so it was," declared Mr. Aldrich. "Myself, my child and the strange woman who brought you to this spot, were the only ones who escaped. The woman with the black face has Indian blood in her veins. A full-blooded

red-skin relative of hers brought us to this cave, of which he alone held the secret. We think he is dead now, for he has not been here for a long time."

"The hand of Heaven must have protected you!"

"That is true, young man, and that woman was Heaven's instrument."

A little later, when the lovers were alone, Anice said:

"Poor papa! His head is not right, and that woman exercises a strange influence over him. He thinks her something more than human. In order to keep the Indians away from this gorge, she has made them believe the place haunted. The wind never rises above a moan in the Gulch, but often both she and father have added their voices to the sounds, making the most hideous shrieks imaginable. That has had a great deal to do with making the place seem so uncanny."

"Well, I should say so!" exclaimed Bert.

"The woman is the foe of the man known as Wild Bill, but I know not why. She wished to make him believe he was haunted, and father compelled me to aid her. One night Bill came down into the Gulch, and I appeared before him as a spirit, all dressed in white. When he started toward me, I retreated into the darkness and covered myself with a black garment. Then I hurried to the cave by way of the door by which you entered."

"This explanation clears up the mystery of Moaning Gulch."

"Yes; you know the secret now."

"Did you ever add your cries to the shrieking of the wind?"

"A few times."

"I thought so!" he exclaimed. "Often I fancied I heard something in those cries which sounded like your voice. That was why the gorge exerted such an influence over me."

"I saw you down there, but you have changed so greatly I was deceived. And I had thought you dead. Still something in my heart kept telling me it was you."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"We saw you when you fled down into the Gulch after you discovered your comrades were slain. Then I made father induce the woman to do something for you. When the Indians came, she showed him how to send the boulder crashing down upon them."

"For which I am very thankful. But how can you see out in to the Gulch?"

"Oh, there is an opening not far from here. It is high up from the level of the gorge, and it was there the woman would add her screams to the moaning of the wind."

At this moment Stephen Aldrich entered the chamber, asking anxiously:

"Where is Nowardo?"

He referred to the woman of the black face, that being the name by which she was known to them.

Neither of the young people knew anything about her, but all three at once set out to search for her, taking a light.

A short distance from the first chamber they entered another. The light showed a figure stretched on a rude couch. It did not stir as they advanced, but the light showed the face was white.

"It is Nowardo," whispered Anice, clinging tremblingly to Bert. "She once told me she should never wash the black from her face till the time came for her to die!"

Stephen Aldrich quickly advanced to the side of the silent figure, speaking her name. She did not stir. He looked into her face and then started back.

"She is dead!" he cried. "She is dead, and I am a free man again! Never more will her will hold command over me! Heavenly Father, I thank thee!"

The following day, as Bert and Anice were looking out into the Gulch, by means of the opening at which the "Black Witch" had so often added her shrieks to the moaning of the wind, they saw a man come slowly and falteringly down to the placer, where the deserted rockers still stood.

It was Wild Bill, and there was something sad about his manner.

At once Bert resolved to let Bill into the secret of the cavern.

"We must depend on him to get us out of these Hills," said the young man. "He can do it, if any living being is able."

Stephen Aldrich readily consented, and a short time later, Wild Bill was astounded to see the black wall of the Gulch open and Bert Wendel appear. At first the Pistol King was not sure he was not confronted by a ghost, but he was

delighted when he found it his young comrade in the flesh.

"Lad," he said, earnestly, "just now I had rather see you than any living person."

The light of pleasure on his face at that moment made him look beautiful to the youth.

Bill was taken into the cave and introduced to Stephen Aldrich and his daughter. Then the mysteries of the place were explained to him. When he had heard their explanations, he asked to see the woman who had declared herself his enemy.

Bert led the Pistol King to the chamber of death.

Wild Bill gave a great start, as his eyes fell on the face from which the black mask had been removed. Bert saw a motion of the man's lips, but no words did he utter.

With uncovered head, Wild Bill stood for a long time looking down on that dead form.

Finally, he turned to Bert and asked to be left alone.

Wild Bill remained in that chamber at least an hour, and when he came forth, his face was pale and stern.

Bert did not venture to question him, and the scout volunteered no explanation.

Later the young man made his way to the chamber. The body of the dead woman still lay on the rude couch.

Her death had been caused by the bullet from Black Bat's revolver. The desperado had fired almost at random, but the "Witch" had been struck. Bert remembered how she had started and how cold her hand had felt after the cavern was entered.

He looked around searchingly when he visited the chamber after Wild Bill's departure.

Something on the stones above the dead woman's head attracted his attention.

He held the light closer, and he saw a single word had been scratched there with a sharp instrument. It was—

HELICE."

Never did Wild Bill show any disposition to speak of the strange woman, and few were there who cared to pry into his secrets.

He found an opportunity to capture some horses from the Indians, and, mounted on the animals, the little party started on the journey for civilization. Thanks to Bill's knowledge of prairie-craft and Indian ways, they succeeded in reaching the settlements, after passing through great perils and having more than one narrow escape.

Big Bruno, the traitor, Black Bat and Seba Rankin never came out of the Hills. It is probable that they met their fate at the hands of the red-men.

To the day of his death, Stephen Aldrich was "cranky" at times. He continued to fancy there was a shadow hanging over him, and nothing would induce him to return to Illinois.

Of course, Anice married Bert Wyndal, and her father made his home with them.

Wild Bill could not be present at the wedding, much to his sincere regret, but he sent his congratulations.

It is not necessary to tell the reader Bert made Anice a model husband, and she was the most devoted wife in the wide world. They had both passed through great trials, and what they had endured made them thankful to God they had been spared for each other in the end.

To the time of his death Wild Bill cherished an intention to return to Moaning Gulch and work the placer. In fact, it has been said he was in the Black Hills for that very purpose when he was killed in Deadwood.

So skillfully was the door of the cavern constructed that it has never been found to this day. Of living persons, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Wyndal alone hold the secret of that door, and both declare they have a horror of the Hills and will never go there again.

So the secret of the cave is likely to remain unsolved.

It is the tomb of the woman who once declared herself Wild Bill's deadly foe. Who or what she was to him he never revealed to any one.

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